

CASHIERS du CINEMART #16

The Revenge of Print

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to my nightmare. I think you're going to like it.

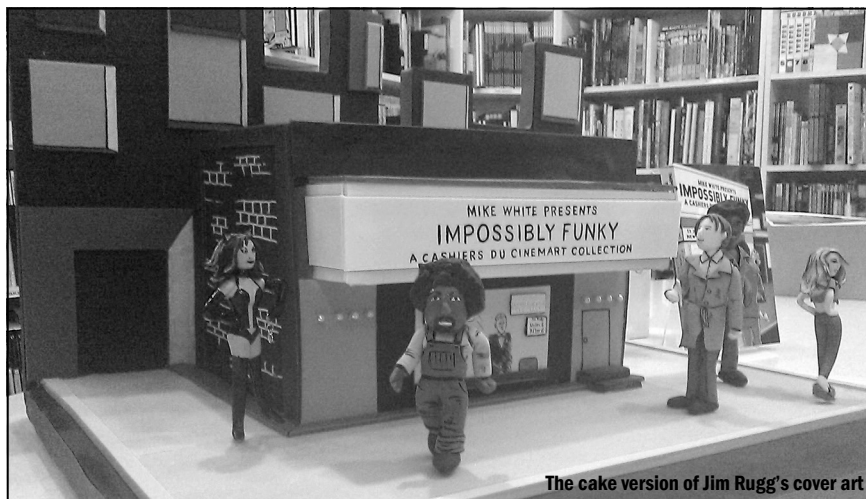
Had anyone told me that I would put out another issue of *Cashiers du Cinemart* I would have laughed in their face. Why then did I not laugh at Benn and Rachel at Atomic Books when they told me about The Revenge of Print? Maybe because I was riding high, having experienced the best night of my autumn 2010 tour in support of Impossibly Funky: A Cashiers du Cinemart Collection. Maybe I had been secretly itching to do another issue. Or, maybe I was on a sugar rush thanks to the Charm City Cakes rendition of Jim Rugg's Impossibly Funky cover art (thank you, Andrea!). Whatever it was, the idea got stuck in my craw and I was sending out a call for submissions in no time.

What is The Revenge of Print? It's a challenge issued by longtime zine supporters Atomic Books and Quimby's to zinesters: make one more issue of their zine in order to combat the demise of the print medium. Print is suffering. When I unleashed *CdC* #15 in 2007, I found that many of the independent stores with which I had dealt in the past had disappeared. And, as I write this, the ink on the death certificate for the second-largest chain bookstore in the country, Borders, isn't even dry. It's hard out here for a pimp.

You'll find a lot of familiar names in *CdC* #16; Rich Osmond, Skizz Cyzyk, David MacGregor, Chris Cummins, Mike Sullivan, Andrew Rausch. You'll also find some new names. In my travels for Impossibly Funky I ran into a lot of loyal *CdC* readers who wanted to put in their two cents; Joshua Gravel, Ralph Elawani, Jef Burnham, Karen Lillis, Kyle Barrowman. And then there's Dion Conflict, longtime reader and friend. Dion has been threatening to unleash his particular brand of film criticism on me for a while; now the whole world can enjoy it.

Thanks to everyone who has been supportive of *Cashiers du Cinemart* and Impossibly Funky. I won't promise an issue #17 but stranger things have happened.

Mike White
August, 2011



The cake version of Jim Rugg's cover art

The logo for 'Film Festival X' is centered at the top. It features the words 'FILM FESTIVAL' in a bold, sans-serif font. Below this is a large, stylized 'X' that also serves as a background for the word 'IS A'. Underneath the 'X' is the word 'SCAM' in a very large, bold, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the logo is the text 'by Skizz Czyzk'. The entire logo is flanked by two symmetrical laurel wreaths, one on each side.

FILM FESTIVAL X IS A SCAM by Skizz Czyzk

Just so you know where I'm coming from before you start reading this article, let me tell you a little about myself. I started making films in the early '80s. In the early '90s, I started attending film festivals, either as a filmmaker, audience member, volunteer staff or crew person. By the late '90s, I found myself engrossed in an actual career working for film festivals. I have been a film festival director, programmer, juror, projectionist, advisor, administrator, technical supervisor, usher, you name it. My point is this: I know all about film festivals and I know all about the relationships between films, filmmakers, and film festivals. I am frequently contacted by filmmakers asking for advice about festivals. There is one frequently asked question that, no matter what I say, has its answer ignored.

The conversation usually starts like this:

Filmmaker: I was approached by [such and such a festival]. Do you know anything about it?

Me: I am aware of [such and such a festival], and I think it is a scam.

Filmmaker: But they told me they have heard great things about my film and that I should enter their festival.

Me: I bet they asked you to pay a *huge* entry fee too, right?

Filmmaker: Yes, but they said they'll refund the entry fee if my film gets rejected.

Me: I predict your film doesn't get

rejected, so your entry fee won't be refunded.

Filmmaker: That would be win/win for me then, wouldn't it? I either get my money back, or I get my film screened.

Me: Touché.

I am not going to name the festival I'm talking about. Instead I'll refer to it as Film Festival X. Film Festival X has been around for years and has separated countless filmmakers from their money. I have read many articles, similar to the one you're reading right now, all about the evils of Film Festival X. Somehow most of those articles have disappeared from websites within months of being posted, and the people who wrote those articles ceased all discussion on the subject. It's speculation on my part that Film Festival X makes enough money from naïve filmmakers to afford the kind of pressure needed to have something completely removed from the internet, and to scare their critics into silence.

Just imagine how much that would cost! At the time of this writing (May 2011), an internet search for "Film Festival X" brings up no festival by that name, so legally, this article is about a festival that does not exist (wink). If I am mistaken, and a real Film Festival X exists, that is a different festival than the one this article is about.

Here is how Film Festival X operates. First, they search around online, looking for lesser-known, attention-

hungry filmmakers. The perfect victims have put a lot of effort into their websites, but maybe not as much into the embedded video clips that appear on their sites. They might brag about hometown screenings or small regional festival screenings, but not screenings at major festivals like Sundance, Slamdance, SXSW, Tribeca, etc.

I used to run a small festival that posted filmmaker contact info online and each year, during the month after the festival, filmmakers would tell me they were approached by Film Festival X, who gave them the impression that my festival recommended their films to Film Festival X. Red flag! The only contact I have ever had with Film Festival X was when they approached me about one of my films that they had heard great things about and encouraged me to pay a huge entry fee to submit to their festival (the fee, of course, would be refunded if my film didn't get in).

ADVICE #1: If you are a filmmaker approached by Film Festival X, and they tell you that another festival recommended your film to them, verify it with the other festival to see if Film Festival X is telling the truth. Festival staffers recommend films to friends who work for other festivals but I have never heard of a festival recommending films to Film Festival X.

ADVICE #2: Any film festival that approaches you with an interest in your film, but is not willing to waive the entry fee, is most likely more interested in your money than your film.

ADVICE #3: Check the websites for Sundance, Slamdance, SXSW, Tribeca, and a few other big festivals to see what they charge for entry fees. If those more-important festivals charge \$50 to \$100 for entry fees, and a lesser-known

festival charges \$100 or more, you should question the validity of that lesser-known festival.

Film Festival X piques the interest of the naïve filmmaker, gets his/her money, and his/her film. Next, the festival starts tacking on all kinds of additional fees. There is a screening fee to cover the theater costs, a promotions & publicity fee to cover the costs of getting press for the film, a printing fee for the film to appear in the festival program book, a distributions fee to cover the costs of additional screenings after the festival, and so on. I found it interesting that so many films screened at Film Festival X won awards, making me question just how many awards the festival gives out? Then I heard that each award winner is asked to pay for a trophy or plaque, so the more awards given, the more potential award fees are collected.

ADVICE #4: After paying the entry fee, a filmmaker should never have to give any more money to a film festival. Festivals should cover the theater costs, promotions costs, et cetera; not the filmmaker.

I have talked to many filmmakers who, despite my advice, ended up handing over thousands of dollars to Film Festival X. Afterwards, when I asked them if they felt ripped off, surprisingly, they said no. They got what they wanted: a theatrical screening of their film in a large city, press, additional screenings, and an award. Plus now they can put "Award Winner, Film Festival X" in between laurel leaves on the front page of their press kits, websites, and DVD boxes.

So, why do I keep insisting the Film Festival X alum filmmaker is naïve when he/she ignored my advice and

still got exactly what he/she wanted? Well, they essentially bought the accomplishments that most filmmakers work towards earning. We could debate about whether or not that's cheating, along the same lines as steroids, payola, and bribery, but even I'll admit there can be more than one way to reach a particular goal and not everyone worries about *how* goals are met as long as they *are* met. The general public isn't going to know how much money was spent to get a name in the paper. However, while friends and family of the filmmakers might be impressed, the filmmakers have just made themselves look bad in the eyes of anyone who knows better, who are usually the same people they should be trying to impress.

ADVICE #5: If you are only concerned with impressing your friends and family, go ahead and buy your bragging points from Film Festival X.

In all my years of programming film festivals, I have seen hundreds of entries that showed up on my desk, with "Award Winner, Film Festival X" boldly announced on the front page of the press kit or DVD box. Nine times out of ten, **THOSE FILMS SUCKED!!!!!!** I'm not just talking about films that weren't good enough to get into other festivals, I'm talking about films that were so terrible that someone, at some point, should have pulled the filmmaker aside and said, "You know, you should probably give up filmmaking, or at least abandon this particular project." What about the one out of ten that didn't suck? I expected it to suck because of the company it kept. In fact, I expected it to suck so bad that I dreaded watching it. When I finally did watch it – even if it didn't totally suck – if I didn't love it in the first twenty minutes, I wasn't likely to watch the rest of it be-

cause I expected it to get much worse. What good can come from starting out on the wrong foot with someone whose job it is to judge your work?

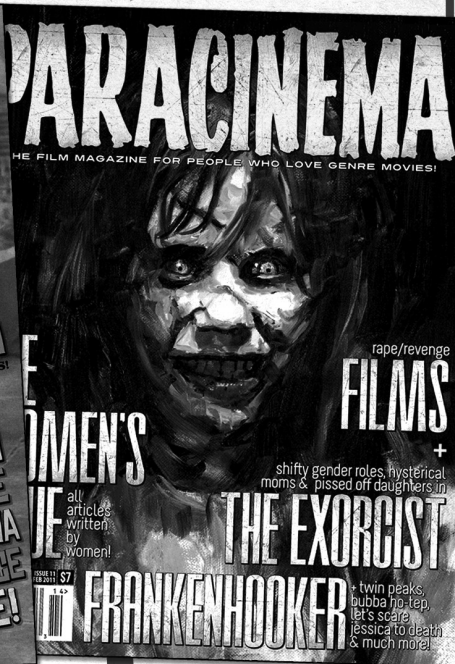
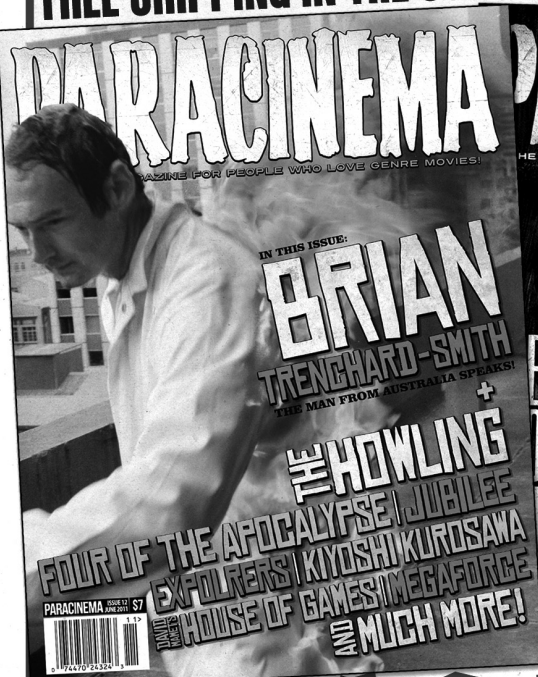
ADVICE #6: Whether or not your film sucks, associating it with a festival notorious for giving awards to films that suck is going to scare away in-the-know industry types who might have been able to help you.

Again, though, what is so wrong with getting what you pay for? To that, I say add up the costs and see if you really are getting what you pay for. What does it cost to four-wall a theater for one screening? What does it cost to print up a handful of press kits and mail them to media outlets? What does it cost to invite industry people to your screening? A filmmaker can do all of these things, and probably for much cheaper than Film Festival X is likely to charge. But, says the filmmaker, what about being able to say my film screened at a festival and won an award? Well, if you're not concerned that the festival is known or respected, book your own screening, call it a festival, and give yourself an award. You wouldn't be the first filmmaker to set up a "vanity fest." A festival I used to run, which would screen over 100 films each year, had an annual operating budget that was less than what many filmmakers pay to screen one film at Film Festival X.

What do I expect to accomplish by writing this article? I expect serious, art-minded and career-minded filmmakers to stay away from Film Festival X, in an effort to not damage their own reputations in the film world they are working hard to be taken serious in. At the same time, I expect attention-hungry hack filmmakers, with more money than sense, to flock towards Film Festival X.

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Nineteen seventy-four's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is not a gory film. Really, it's not. In fact, it's not even a very bloody film. And while *Cashiers du Cinéma* readers may understand this fully, just try impressing this point upon someone who hasn't seen the movie.

So why does *TCM*, a film seemingly known by everyone, suffer such a false reputation? Could it be that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* was made as a landmark, milestone, groundbreaking, watershed horror film... only to have its reputation re-written by three needless sequels (1986, 1990, 1997) and an equally unnecessary parallel series (2003, 2006)?

Whatever the reason, it is a cold, hard fact that *TCM* is misunderstood. Hell, just ask an actor – remaining anonymous here – who auditioned for the part of hulking chainsaw murderer Leatherface in the 2003 remake.

“The main thing [the producers] kept talking about was: ‘It wasn’t going to be gory like the original.’ And it made you wonder if they had truly seen the original!”

And after Tobe Hooper, director of the original *TCM* attended a 2003 Hollywood screening of his 1974 film, he joked, “It wasn’t nearly as gory as I had heard.”

So if not a bloody gore film, what is *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*? It's a powerful film about violence, largely transcendent of the horror genre.

Oh sure, it works on a horror-film level. Viewers bite their nails while watching Sally Hardesty (Marilyn Burns) escape the clutches of the backwoods clan that killed and butchered her brother and friends.

But the true, deep horror to be derived from *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* comes not from chainsaw killings or chases through the dark Texas woods. It comes from the film's realistic look at a very depraved, degenerate extreme of human existence.



**THESE
MASSACRES**

**America's most
bizarre and
brutal crimes!...**

COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED!

by Mike Malloy

As with 1972's *Deliverance* and the pawn shop scene in 1994's *Pulp Fiction*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* reminds us that some really sick shit goes on behind closed doors when no one is looking.

So how did the later films of the *TCM* series go so far astray from the important vision of the original?

A look at the six films (often mistakenly called a “franchise” – the films were made by four different companies) reveals that little care was taken in maintaining the tone of the original, in securing the return of original actors, and in preserving the overarching story continuity.

The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, 1974 (TCM)

“*TCM* was a ‘docu-drama,’” says one of the film’s stars, Edwin Neal. “Lots of people thought we had used stock footage from police archives. Do you get that sense from the others?”

In this simple statement, Neal hammers it on the head. The original *TCM*, doubtless shaped by Tobe Hooper’s background in documentary filmmaking, has been described as a film about killings so realistic it can almost be mistaken as snuff. But even snuff and documentaries are filmed with an audience in mind, and the audience is conscious of this. Hooper’s *TCM* skillfully erases viewers’ awareness of the filmmaker-audience relationship, putting the viewer in the thick of the terror.

We are “there” when Sally and her friends – Kirk (William Vail), Pam (Teri McMinn), Jerry (Allen Danziger), and Franklin (Paul Partain) – run afoul of



the deprived cannibalistic Texas clan – Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen), the Hitchhiker (Neal), the Cook (Jim Siedow), and Grandpa (John Dugan). We are watching from the screen door – too scared to go in – as Kirk is beat over the head with a mallet and dragged to the slaughter. We peer into the kitchen just long

enough to see Leatherface sawing up a victim’s body (Oh, heavens that must be Kirk’s body! It’s hard to tell! His face is obscured by a meat grinder in the foreground!).

The only shots that take the viewer out of the documentary feel are the extreme close-ups of Sally’s eyeballs during the dinner scene. Those shots, while squirm-inducing, break the doc feel with camera work that calls attention to itself.

And it wasn’t just the unobtrusive camera work that made *TCM* a piece of high horror realism. The intense, hazardous working conditions also contributed to the sense of actual danger. In Brad Shellady’s documentary *Texas Chain Saw Massacre: A Family Portrait*, Edwin Neal and Jim Siedow talk about violence that was more real than staged. Siedow apparently beat Marilyn Burns until she fainted, and Neal said he felt his skull cracking during a scene in which he was beaten with a hardwood stick. Also in *Family Portrait*, Gunnar Hansen talks about covering his head for dear life as he blindly waits for a flying chainsaw to land. And there was the insanity-inducing, now-legendary marathon 26-hour shoot of the dinner scene.

Also integral to the film’s realism is the entirely plausible, credible living

arrangement of the villains. Leatherface and his family are, for the most part, cut off from regular society. They live primitively. But unlike the unrealistic backwoods characters in such *Deliverance* knock-offs as *Backwoods* and *Hunter's Blood*, the *TCM* clan are not part of some lost, forgotten-by-time pocket of civilization. They have an electric generator. The Hitchhiker has worked in a slaughterhouse. The Cook works in a filling station/barbecue shack.

It seems entirely plausible that, as late as 1974, rural peoples could be living on the outermost fringes of society, committing unspeakable atrocities undetected.

Sometimes *TCM* is mistakenly credited with giving birth to the “teens vs. slasher” cycle of films, which had its heyday in the early '80s with such films as *Friday the 13th* and *Prom Night*. But, despite the fact that the film's opening narration notes that the victims were “youths,” the *teenagedness* of the characters is not played up and seems to be of little relevance. Sure, one of the girls is wearing short shorts, but that's appropriate to the era. And unlike the '80s teen horror films, the protags of *TCM* are not on teenage business. They are not out on prom night. They are not having a slumber party. They are not babysitting. They are engaged in perfectly adult business: discovering whether their grandfather's grave was molested.

But were they intentional, all these elements that contributed to *TCM*'s realism, timelessness and greatness? Perhaps not. Dugan reports in *A Family Portrait* that Hooper and screenwriter Kim Henkel wanted to work in some cheap sexploitation by having Marilyn Burns's shirt ripped off. And Hooper has repeatedly bemoaned that audiences didn't find *TCM* to be as funny as he intended it to be. Maybe, then, the film is partly a happy accident of filmmaking.

Released in late 1974, *TCM* became the third highest-grossing film of 1975.

Sadly, most of the performers received only paltry remuneration from the profits, despite their endurance of long hours and physical pain. They would suffer more disrespect when being considered for roles in the sequels.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2, 1986 (TCM2)

“When I first met Tobe,” relates *TCM2* star Bill Moseley, “He stunned me by telling me that he thought the original was very funny, it was a comedy. And I didn't think there was anything funny about it.”

And while Moseley is right – the 1974 *TCM* should not be viewed as a boffo film – he too had been able to find the original as a source of humor. Moseley was discovered and cast in the sequel because he had spoofed the Hitchhiker character in an early-'80s short-film parody entitled *The Texas Chainsaw Manicure*. In fact, Moseley had also written *Chainsaw Manicure*.

With a director lamenting that the humor in *TCM* went unappreciated, and with a principal actor who was cast because he had parodied the original, there was little chance that 1986's *TCM2* would try to capture the raw, dead-serious power of the original.

But Hooper did make attempts to maintain some continuity with the first film. The director was wrapping up a three-picture deal with Cannon Films, and although Hooper was originally meant only to produce a *TCM* sequel for Cannon, he ended up at the helm. The director tried to cast the stars of the original, but Cannon was only able to offer union scale (minimum wage, in studio film terms). Edwin Neal was reportedly holding out for 2½-3 times scale, and Gunnar Hansen has often said he merely wanted some payment above and beyond scale. Only Jim

Siedow returned to reprise his role of The Cook.

If Neal had been cast in *TCM2*, would he have played the Hitchhiker, who appears to have been flattened by a tractor-trailer at the end of the 1974 film? Or would he have played Chop Top, the very Hitchhiker-esque character that Moseley would go on to embody?

“My recollection is that it was to be simply an extension of the Hitchhiker,” says Neal. “And only later when I wasn’t cast... was it rewritten and Chop Top was born from the ashes.”

As it is implied in the sequel (and apparently stated more expressly in one of the film's deleted scenes), there is a good reason why Chop Top is similar in manner and appearance to the Hitchhiker.

"Chop Top is the Hitchhiker's twin brother," says Moseley. "And I was off fighting in Vietnam while the Hitchhiker was getting run over by that semi."

Despite efforts on Hooper's part to maintain the series continuity, *TCM2* has little to do with the original. Drastically different in tone, the sequel plays like a repulsively gory cartoon.

Picking up the story of the cannibalistic central-Texas clan 13 years later, *TCM2* finds that Leatherface and Co. — dubbed “the Sawyers” in this outing (Get it? The *S*A~~W~~yers. Haw haw haw) — have moved from their remote, rural location to an abandoned theme park, “Texas Battle Land.” Armed with a shiny new pick-up truck, car phones, and knowledge of pop culture (at least enough to crack *Rambo III* jokes), the cannibals are sawing their way through Utah

football fans, winning chili cook-offs, and terrorizing a local disc jockey. Oh, and there's a 137-year-old Grandpa.

The protagonists are given such names as Stretch and Lefty, the latter played by Dennis Hopper in an oversized cowboy hat. (In one small bit of continuity, Hopper's character is the revenge-seeking uncle of Paul Partain's ill-fated Franklin character from the original film.)

But whatever its failings, at least Hooper's second *TCM* film has an effect on the viewer, even if it is to repulse and haunt the viewer with the gratuitous gore and the nightmarish underground lair. While Hooper's *TCM2* makes an impression, future installments have trouble even making that claim.

Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III, 1990 (TCM3)

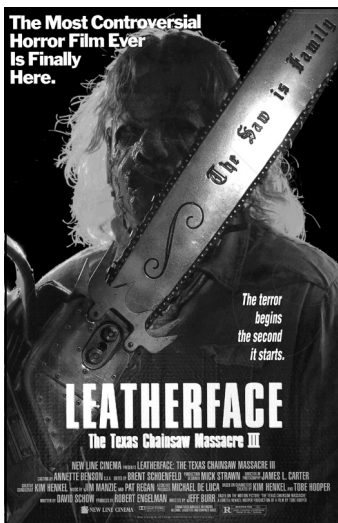
“The only continuity is the sound of a chainsaw,” says director Jeff Burr, regarding his *TCM* entry, *Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III*. Burr’s film did not involve Tobe Hooper in any way, was not filmed in Texas, did not see any returning cast from the original, and featured very few returning characters.

Burr says he was forbidden by the studio, New Line, to contact Hooper.

“They said it was some contractual thing where I couldn’t talk to him – which... could be B.S.”

And although Kim Henkel is credited as Creative Consultant, Burr says his contributions were negligible, if any.

“Kim Henkel was initially going to be



some kind of consultant on it, and he still retains that credit in the movie. But I literally didn't meet him. He was never on the set or anything." Burr says it was a "difference in opinion" of Henkel versus New Line producer Mike DeLuca and screenwriter David Schow as to what kind of film to make.

Understand, *TCM3* was not so much meant to be a continuation of the existing *TCM* series as it was meant to be the beginning of New Line's new *TCM* franchise. New Line was doing well with their *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, and the slasher films were just coming off their profitable heyday.

There are plenty of signs pointing to the fact that *TCM3* was meant to make the Leatherface character into a new screen slashing superstar, a la Freddy or Jason. In fact, the film's full title – *Leatherface: Texas Chainsaw Massacre III* – bears the character's name out front.

"The first script I read was [titled] 'Leatherface,'" says Burr. "No question in mind that it was very consciously done. Which is strange because Leatherface doesn't have a heck of a lot of screen time in the movie."

"They had no definite time[table]," says actor R.A. Mihailoff, who played the title role in *TCM3*. "But I had a contract option that spelled out my compensation for two more sequels, and I had been given the impression that it was going to be a franchise. All this led me to believe that there would be more pictures coming, which I was absolutely ready to do."

At the time of our interview, Mihailoff said of the Leatherface character, "I truly intended – and still hold out hope – to be the first one to play the role twice." (Sadly, the nice-guy actor did not get his wish, as Andrew Bryniarski accomplished that feat with appearances in the 2003 and 2006 films.)

Although Burr says he intended to return to the mean-spirited nastiness of the original, he was a last-minute hire and says New Line only wanted him to do a "workmanlike" job shooting Schow's script.

"I got hired two and a half weeks before we started shooting. In those two and a half weeks, I was casting – none of the movie had been cast – I was supervising the building of the sets that were still being built, I was storyboarding the whole movie as much as I could, and hiring the crew. Almost every decision was on a pragmatic level, not a conceptual level."

And so Burr didn't try to re-write the script, which inexplicably puts Leatherface together with a new backwoods clan.

"That's one of the first questions I asked Dave Schow. Who is this family? And he really didn't have a definitive answer that satisfied me. Who is this fucking family? I don't know. Basically, what it was was just a bunch of like-minded people that kind of gravitated toward each other."

"They just fell together in some kind of family group by circumstance, by a common interest," echoes Mihailoff.

"A more interesting movie would have been: How did these people get together?" notes Burr.

Burr's film was watered down by cuts from both New Line and the MPAA ("it was re-submitted 14 times to the ratings board....and we missed the released date because of this, which is almost unheard of"). And the film's ending was re-shot by another director.

"The film was never a masterpiece, never a brilliant movie at all," says Burr. "But there was a moment where it was actually a pretty darn good – for what it was – horror sequel. And certainly it could be compared favorably to, like, a *Friday the 13th* sequel, or whatever."

But a “pretty darn good horror sequel” is still not a worthy follow up to the original *TCM*.

TCM3 features elaborate, *Most Dangerous Game*-style mantraps in the woods that just don’t seem consistent with the clan’s crude style, which in the first film consists of beat-them-over-the-head-with-a-mallet-and-drag-their-convulsing-bodies-to-the-slaughter methods.

And the film takes pretty Hollywood actors like Viggo Mortensen, puts them in overalls, rubs soot on their faces, and expects viewers to believe these are degenerate backwoodsmen.

Perhaps the single neatest moment in the film is Caroline Williams’s six-second, unbilled, wordless cameo. As fans may remember, her disc jockey character survived the gruesome events of *TMC2*, and in *TCM3*, she is a TV reporter, still on the fiend’s trail.

The film opened 11th at the box office. New Line did not care to make a *TCM4*.

So as the third entry in the existing series, *TCM3* doesn’t make much sense. Perhaps had it spawned its own horror franchise it would have fit better in that context.

Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1997) (TCM:TNG)

At the very least, Kim Henkel’s *Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation* brought the series back to Texas.

“I had heard about it,” says Mihailoff of the fourth film’s production, which used *The Return of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as a shooting title. “I heard they were going to do it in Texas, non-union. And I didn’t want to step out from behind the aegis of the Screen Actors Guild.”

It’s uncertain whether Mihailoff was ever considered for reprising his Leatherface role in the fourth *TCM*, but Hansen says in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Shocking Truth* that he had again been

offered the part. Again, for money reasons, his casting as Leatherface fell through. Similarly, Henkel was unable to secure the return of original cast members Siedow and Neal, although Neal said he did come in and read for a part.

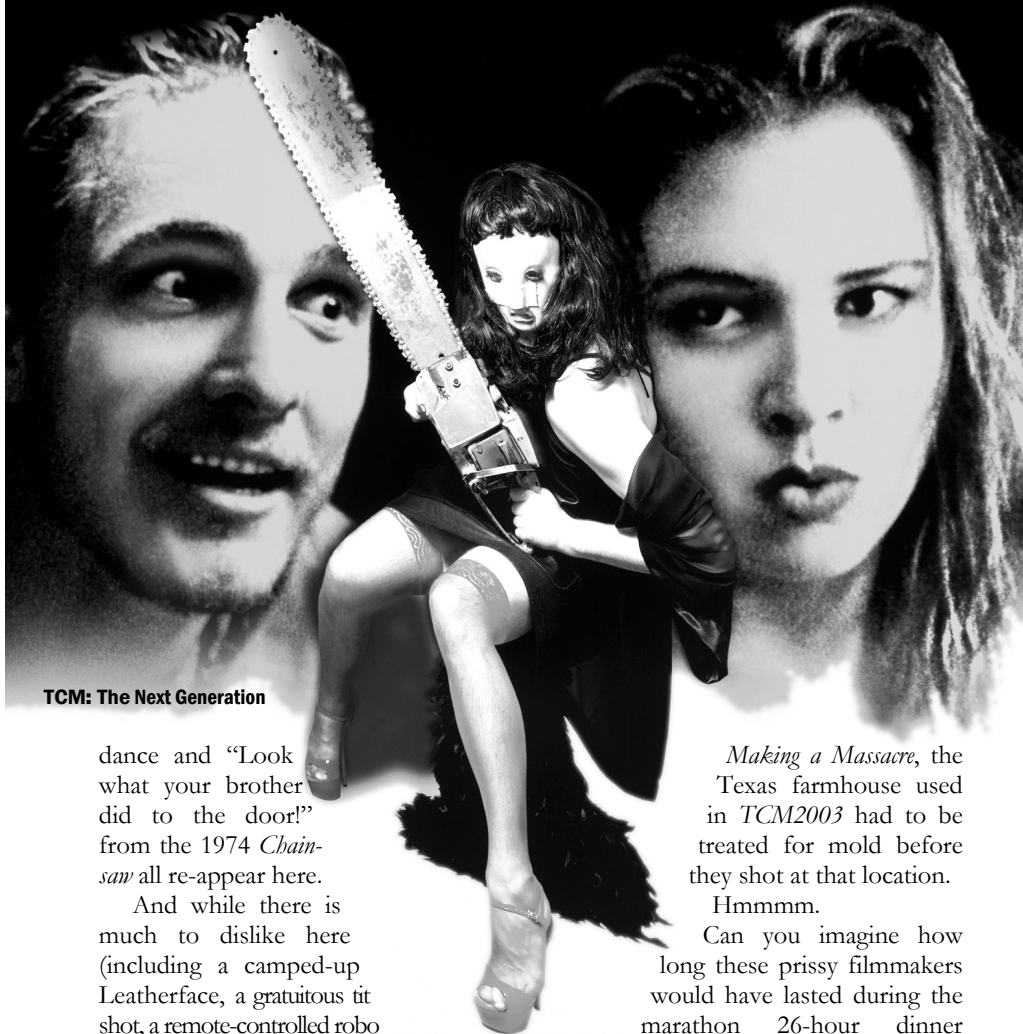
“Again, I suspect that money and the coke budget came into play,” jokes Neal about why they couldn’t afford to hire him. “Those two on theatrical projects have historically been difficult to reconcile.”

Henkel, who was following up his screenwriting of the 1974 original by both writing and directing part four, made sure to get some of the classic cast to return, if only in cameos; John Dugan, Marilyn Burns, and Paul Partain all turn up at the end for just a brief moment.

But Leatherface and fam are played by series newcomers, including late Austin musician Robert Jacks as a mullet-coifed Leatherface and a pre-stardom Matthew McConaughey as the homicidal madman, Vilmer (the star of the film, really). A then-undiscovered Renee Zellweger played the heroine.

Despite the fact that *Next Generation* is not a numbered sequel, the film is also not a remake. It is set after *TCM3*, and the opening title card and narration acknowledge both the events of the original (“news of bizarre chainsaw wielding family”) and of the two sequels (which are dissed as “minor, yet apparently related incidents”).

And while not a remake, so many moments from the original occur in *TCM:TNG* that it is perhaps best described as a *reworking* of the elements from the original (much as Brian De Palma lifted a shower scene and a cross-dressing killer from Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and reworked them into an entirely different story, *Dressed to Kill*). The meat hook, the flashbulbs, the chainsaw



TCM: The Next Generation

dance and “Look what your brother did to the door!” from the 1974 *Chainsaw* all re-appear here.

And while there is much to dislike here (including a camped-up Leatherface, a gratuitous tit shot, a remote-controlled robo-leg, and a European business associate), the production and art design are really pretty good. The Texas farmhouse is not only decrepit; it is also messy as hell — junked up with human remains, pizza slices, hardware and blank keys.

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, 2003 (TCM2003)

A single story perfectly illustrates the wrongheaded approach taken by the filmmakers responsible for the 2003 remake.

According to the self-important 76-minute documentary *Chainsaw Redux*:

Making a Massacre, the Texas farmhouse used in *TCM2003* had to be treated for mold before they shot at that location.

Hmmmm.

Can you imagine how long these prissy filmmakers would have lasted during the marathon 26-hour dinner shoot in the 1974 original? Would they have been able to stand the smell of rotting meat cooking under the hot lights and sweltering Texas heat, with crew members running outside to projectile vomit? Not likely.

So the remake missed out on the very real insanity and intensity that translate from crazy production methods.

And several frames of the finished 2003 film prove just how poor director Marcus Nispel's note taking was. Did he miss the fact that the '74 original has been repeatedly lauded for its sugges-

tive meat hook scene, which skillfully implies the meat hook penetrating Pam's back without actually depicting it?

He must have, because in the 2003 version there it is, plain as day: the meat hook penetrating the back of Andy (Mike Vogel).

In fact, the 2003 New Line remake of *TCM* missed the point on a number of counts, further proving that today's filmmakers just don't get it.

Whereas the 1974 original had locations and characters that were realistically bedraggled and dingy, the remake, subscribing to today's filmmaking style of perpetual ante-upping, didn't have a single surface in the whole film that wasn't covered with blood, slime, brain matter, or other filth. If *TCM3* was guilty of being too clean, the remake was guilty of being too scum-covered.

Scum-covered, yes, except for the protagonistic group of young stars and starlets. What a beautiful lot. There's no room for a fat, invalid Franklin amongst the protags in this film, no sir. And predictably, it is the jiggiest, juggliest member of the group – Erin (Jessica Biel) – who lives to be the film's final girl.

But Erin doesn't just live to escape, movie over. That would be too realistic for a Hollywood product. In order to appease modern audiences' blood lust and *Buffy*-esque girl power ideas, the Jessica Biel heroine lives not only to escape, but to hack Leatherface's arm off with a meat cleaver and to repeatedly run over the evil sheriff with his own patrol car.

But what else would you expect from a film so sorry it had to buy off influential internet film critic Harry Knowles with a disembodied cameo?

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning (2006) (TCM:TB)

It's almost pointless to review *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning* in the

context of the *TCM* series, as it is much more a product of new-millennium Horror Remake Mania than anything else. By the time this "remake prequel" was made, the process of producing horror re-treads had been reduced to an artless science. The hit *Dawn of the Dead* remake (2004), for instance, featured Johnny Cash warbling a country song over scenes of doom in the opening credits, and so predictably, the 2006 *Hills Have Eyes* remake had Webb Pierce warbling a country tune over scenes of doom in the opening credits. Similarly, whereas we're introduced to the *TCM2003* protagonists under the familiar classic-rock guitar riff of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," we're introduced to the *Beginning* protagonists under the familiar classic-guitar riff of Free's "All Right Now." This type of filmmaking has been boiled down to pure formula.

With all due respect to Jeff Burr's idea that an origin story would be intriguing (and with all due respect to an origin script that Mihailoff apparently wrote in the '90s), such a prequel is, in fact, a dubious idea for the *TCM* concept, as it means spending a majority of time with the family; this premise works best when you only see the villains through the eyes of the unsuspecting protagonists.

That said, if you plow ahead with the origin idea (and assuming you want to horrify the way the '74 film did), you must make the tone as realistic as possible. *TCM:TB*'s idea of the family resorting to cannibalism out of financial destitution (the local slaughterhouse closed its doors) is a serviceable one. But instead of showing a family becoming gradually hardened and sociopathic by survival necessities, the story plops all the characters in a surrealist world of pure cruelty, where everybody is crass, disgusting, callous and self-motivated.

The abattoir supervisor stands by impassively while Leatherface's mom goes into painful labor on the slaughterhouse floor. The outgoing sheriff makes small talk about massaging horse innards to bring the beasts to sexual climax. This sort of bizarre, cruel universe may work fine for stylized genres like the Spaghetti Western. But the effectiveness of the original *TCM* (and what should have been the point of the entire series) was based on "terrifying because it could really happen."

In the *TCM:TB*'s DVD audio commentary, the filmmakers effectively eschew the essence of the 1974 original by making it clear their film has no interest in the implied violence of Tobe Hooper's movie. There is repeated commentary discussion about envelope pushing, and apparently, the on-set mantra was "more is more."

All that remains is a return to voice-over duties from original narrator John Larroquette, a re-use of the iconic tuning-fork noise, and a couple of shots during the dinner scene (yes, this film has one too) that were meant to reference Hooper's compositions and framings. But at this late date, the series has no spiritual connections to its origins – which is somewhat ironic for an origin movie.

Time, history, sequels, a remake and a remake prequel have re-written the reputation of the original. And it ain't over yet. At the time of this writing, a new *TCM* sequel – *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3D* – is set for a 2012 release. The proposed gimmick of this sequel – besides the one obvious from the title – is that it jumps back to the 1974 film, picks up the story, ignores all the sequels, and then jumps ahead 35 years.

But for horror fans who know and care, there will only be one worthwhile *TCM*.

"I get to go to the conventions, celebrity

golf, haunted houses, fan gatherings at nifty gated homes all over the country," says Edwin Neal. "I get taken to dinner by fans. And it will be me deliriously happy at the tremendous good fortune of getting to sit at a table and write my name on pieces of paper and photographs for \$20 a pop instead of having to work for a living – and hear over and over and over, 'What the fuck were *they* thinking?'"

"The best part is, I never have to say anything. My defense for years has been mounted by the public, and I haven't had to spend a dime on lawyers! Life is good."

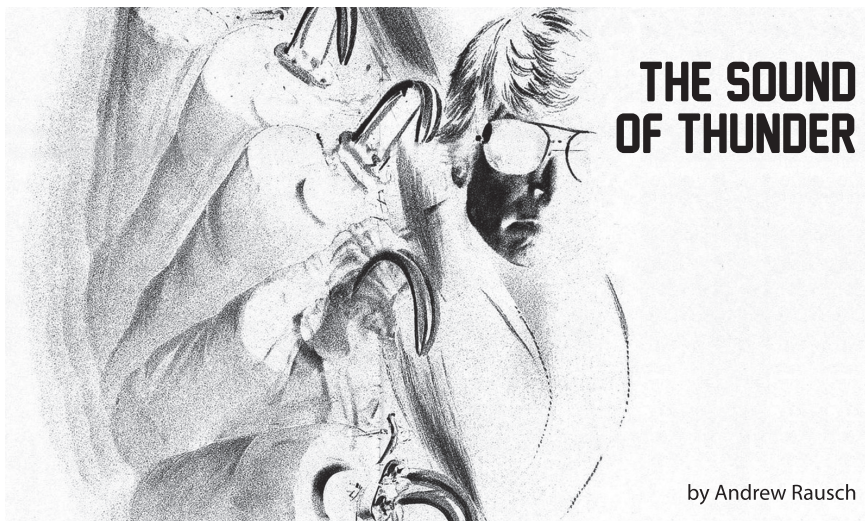
Perhaps director Jeff Burr, though not involved in any way with the '74 original, has the best understanding of *TCM*'s success, as it derived from both pure serendipity and a maverick filmmaking method that makes studio films pale in comparison.

"(*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, for what it is and what it intended to do and what it does, it is almost a perfect movie. You cannot hope to attain that kind of thing again, because it was an accident. It was alchemy. Literally because of the people involved, the heat in Texas that summer."

"It's not just nostalgia. It's craft, it's commitment. That film is a seminal independent movie. Forget 'horror film.' It's a seminal independent American movie. And it was made with incredible care and craft and insanity. And commitment. And that's what you don't get [these days]."

"To make a really truly groundbreaking or breakthrough horror film, it's got to be made outside the system. Because New Line ain't going to make that movie. Like primitive folk art, outsider art. Dimension's not going to make that movie. New Line's not going to make that movie."

And there you have it.



Rolling Thunder is one of the most explosively violent films of the 1970s. Depending on whom you ask, it just may be the definitive revenge film. Bring up this magnificent little 1977 picture to a knowledgeable cineaste and watch their eyes light up. But mention the title *Rolling Thunder* to any casual film buff, and he or she probably won't know what you're talking about. Sadly, this gem of a film has fallen into relative obscurity over the years – largely due to its long-delayed legitimate DVD release. It wasn't until 2011 that MGM made *Rolling Thunder* available through their Manufacture on Demand service.

Rolling Thunder tells the story of Air Force Major Charles Rane (William Devane), a seven-year prisoner of war returning home to a small town in Texas. Rane comes back to find his life in shambles; his wife has moved on and his son no longer remembers him. As Rane attempts to come to grips with these changes in his life, he loses his family and his hand to a band of baddies (led by none other than *The Dukes of Hazzard*'s James Best). Through this tragedy, Rane once again finds meaning in life, dedicating his existence to exacting bloody revenge against the men who took away his family. Armed with a prosthetic hook and a sawed-off shotgun, Rane reunites with P.O.W. Buddy Johnny Vohden (Tommy Lee Jones) and asks him to accompany him on his murder spree. With nothing else going on in his life, Vohden nonchalantly agrees. The two men track down the murderers one by one, shooting them and giving them the occasional prosthetic hook to the testicles.

The film, written first by *Taxi Driver* scribe Paul Schrader and then rewritten by Heywood Gould (*Fort Apache*, *The Bronx*, *The Boys from Brazil*), was produced by Twentieth Century-Fox. But then, as legend has it, acts of violence erupted at pre-release screenings, causing the studio to reconsider its affiliation with *Rolling Thunder*. Twentieth Century-Fox sold the film to American International Pictures, who released the film on October 17, 1977.

American International Pictures wasn't able to give the film the advertising push that a bigger studio like Twentieth Century-Fox could have provided, so the film essentially came and went beneath the mainstream radar. Despite this, those who

saw the film would remember it. Several critics gave the film commendable reviews, and Gene Siskel named *Rolling Thunder* one of the ten best films of 1977. It would also become one of Quentin Tarantino's favorite films, and he would later name both a character (Aldo "Rane" in *Inglourious Basterds*) and his short-lived video release company (Rolling Thunder Films) accordingly. It might also be noted that the film's villain, James Best, was Tarantino's acting teacher.

Paul Schrader has generally received most of the credit for *Rolling Thunder* over the past thirty-plus years, but today we know that Heywood Gould is responsible for the majority of what works in the film. According to the book *Schrader on Schrader*, in which Paul Schrader disavows the finished film, he describes his original screenplay as being something completely different from the resulting work. In Schrader's version, Rane wasn't a sympathetic protagonist, but rather another reincarnation of the relentless and racist Ethan Edwards character from *The Searchers* (similar to Schrader's take in *Taxi Driver*). In another startling alteration from the story we now know, Schrader's Rane wasn't even a war hero, but a coward *pretending* to be a hero. Despite the extensive rewrites, *Rolling Thunder* does share one important aesthetic with other Schrader-scripted films – the film is a slow burn. It starts off rather quietly but eventually erupts into a violent free-for-all in which anything goes.

In an effort to learn more about this film that I so loved, I sat down with screenwriter, director, and novelist Heywood Gould for a brief conversation about *Rolling Thunder*.

Andrew Rausch: *How did you become involved with Rolling Thunder?*

Heywood Gould: It's 1977, and I'm living in a furnished room in a fleabag hotel, working as a bartender for 30 bucks a shift, writing articles for the underground press, hack books about camping, headaches, Swedish massage, group sex; porno novels at 10 bucks a page. I've already had my first novel, *One Dead Debutante*, published. I've written a few horror scripts for local producers. One was for a Texas guy with a long white beard and a ten-gallon hat who made movies for drive-ins. Another script was about a couple of cops in the South Bronx called *Fort Apache, The Bronx*. My rate is a thousand dollars per script, but I managed to wangle \$1,250 for *Fort Apache* because I have to travel back and forth to the Bronx. I'm not married or in school or in the Army anymore, so I'm a happy guy.

Unbeknownst to me, Bill Devane is reading my collected works. I get a call from an agent in Los Angeles. There's a script that needs a rewrite. They're sending me a ticket. I fly first class, and they put me up at the Beverly Hilton. The hotel is booked, so they give me a junior suite with unlimited room service. The cocktail waitress looks like Yvette Mimeux. I tell her I'm in town to do a movie. I get a nod and an uh-huh, because she's heard this all before. I drink Martell VSOP and charge it to my room. She reconsiders. Hooray for Hollywood!

The next day I have a meeting at Fox. The producer, Larry Gordon, is fast-talking, thickly-bearded, born in Yazoo, Mississippi, late of American International Pictures. The director, John Flynn, has the booze flush and weary sneer of a kindred spirit. Devane is hot. He's just played J.F.K. on a big TV movie. "He's not happy with the script," Larry tells me, "and he thinks you can help it." The script is by Paul Schrader, already famous for *Taxi Driver*. They tell me to read it and react. "The lead needs to be more sympathetic," Gordon says. "We need better women." "Who doesn't?" I say. No laugh. This is a tough town.

Later Flynn takes me down a long, quiet hallway with offices on both sides, lots of secretaries staring into space, invisible producers hollering orders. We go into the “script room,” where Fox has kept original copies of every script ever written for them. “Sometimes I come in here and just browse,” Flynn says. Poking around I find a shooting script of *His Girl Friday*, 206 pages. Another of *Lady in the Lake* by Raymond Chandler. “Take ‘em,” Flynn says. “They don’t care.”

He then informs me that Schrader was supposed to direct but has quit the picture.

AR: *What was your initial reaction upon reading Schrader’s script?*

HG: I read the script that afternoon. I can’t remember how I reacted. Only that I had different ideas about the characters. There were a few added scenes that came to mind, and I felt it needed changes to some scenes. I remember I thought the portrayal of Johnny’s – the Tommy Lee Jones character – family was patronizing; they were shown as dumb rednecks. In general, I thought the characters seemed like symbols and not human beings. And there was no interesting woman.

AR: *By Schrader’s own admission, the William Devane character was a pretty unlikable person in that first draft. What can you tell me about that?*

HG: I remember thinking that the Rane character had no human dimension; he was something like a Brechtian construct to advance an ideological message, and I could understand why an actor wouldn’t want to play the part. He had no connection with his son. There was no sympathy for a guy who’d been tortured in a POW camp for seven years. No appreciation of the emotional alterations you would have to go through to survive. No insight into the kind of person he was before his ordeal. I remember the biggest arguments I had in the 1960s were about demonizing the warrior along with the war. From the orthodox left-wing point of view the soldiers were “proletarian” victims – not perpetrators and certainly not mercenaries. I always felt the Jane Fonda faction were intellectual snobs looking down on the soldiers. I think that’s how I responded to the script.

AR: *In what ways did racism manifest itself in the script?*

HG: I really don’t remember any overt racism. I know that Larry Gordon would have insisted on removing it. After all, you can’t root for a racist. Maybe I saw a later draft.

AR: *Quentin Tarantino has famously said that his favorite parts of Rolling Thunder were your contributions. What scenes featured your greatest contributions, and what were they?*

HG: I didn’t know Tarantino said that. I’m flattered.

I pretty much put the whole script through the typewriter, changing stuff, adding lines, rewriting scenes, etc. I wrote the Charley/Cliff relationship pretty much from scratch – the rope scene, playing catch with the son... I wrote the Linda relationship all the way through. I wrote a scene in which she ties a knot in a cocktail cherry with her teeth. It made the released version but then inexplicably disappeared. I wrote the last part of the picture starting with Cliff going off in search of Charley to place them in the locations John Flynn had found – cattle pens, cafes, the brother, etc. The best scenes, as always, were written on the back of a menu while they are lighting the next set-up. I wrote the shooting scene with Linda and Charley like that, and a couple of speeches here and there when John said, “I need a line for this.”

AR: *Did you do any research on or interview any real-life P.O.W.s for Rolling Thunder? I ask because the “learn to love the rope” scene contains so much insight. When you see it, you think, “That’s got to be right. That must be the way it really is.”*

HG: I didn’t do any special research. The scene just bubbled up out of the murky depths of my psyche. The line “learn to love the rope” ultimately became the motto of the crew when the temperature went over 120° Fahrenheit during the shoot.

AR: *Did you write Johnny’s line, “I’m gonna kill a bunch of people”? There’s not much to that line, but it’s directness makes it brilliant. It’s easily one of my favorite movie lines.*

HG: I honestly don’t remember. I wrote the scene with the hooker, so I guess I wrote the line.

AR: *What are some your memories of the shoot?*

HG: The crew worked hard – partied harder – and were ready to go the next morning. We were staying at the Holiday Inn and making good use of the bar. There was a quartet that could play any kind of music – from country and western to bebop; a female vocalist who could sing any style, from Peggy Lee to Brenda Lee. A place called Bill’s served huge plates of barbecued brisket. I could never eat pastrami after that. After the first week, I noticed we had a discreet contingent of Texas Rangers hanging around to protect us from obstreperous locals, and they studiously ignored the strong herbal odors coming from the prop truck.

We hired a high school marching band for the opening scene. They stood in full uniform in the heat for hours, doing take after take, for \$10 a head – all cheerful and excited about being in a movie.

There was an all-night Mexican restaurant with cabrito and Dos Equis with waitresses who looked like Linda Darnell and a mariachi band in full regalia that serenaded us at two in the morning. An amiable old man in faded jeans and scuffed boots started hanging around, cadging drinks. One night he approached shyly and asked if we would come to his house for a barbecue. We didn’t want to hurt his feelings. He told us to start looking for his name when we got 20 miles out of town. We ultimately found his name, but it took us 10 more miles to get to his house. It turned out that he was one of the biggest ranchers in the area. He barbecued a whole steer and the fixin’s for us that day, and his daughter thanked us for being so “hospitable” to him. I caught a look of shrewd amusement in his eyes as we wandered around in awe.

We went to a town called Bandera to hear a band called Arky Blue’s. Everybody was standing around the bar with side arms. A guy with two pearl-handled Colts pounded me on the back, “Whaddaya think of our local boys?”



“Best music I ever heard,” I said.

James Best flew in to play the boss villain. He sized me up. “I studied with Stella Adler,” he told me. “I was one of Stella’s boys.” Later I overheard him asking John Flynn, “Can I change some of his shit?” But he never did change a word.

In the bar of the Holiday Inn one night, one of the local stunt men said he had seen Roy Rogers’s riding double. The Hollywood stunt guys took this as unpardonable blasphemy and demanded a retraction. They knocked on my door. “We’re choosin’ up sides in the parking lot,” they said. Unfamiliar with the lingo, I thought they were organizing a ballgame so I said, “I’m in.” I went downstairs and found myself in the middle of a serious brawl. The next day, the stunt guys came over to me and said, “Hey, you New York writers can really handle yourselves.” To this day that’s the best compliment I’ve ever gotten in this business.

AR: *What was John Flynn like, and what are your thoughts on him as a director?*

HG: If John Flynn had been born 30 years earlier, he would have directed 30 more films and there would be John Flynn festivals all over the noir circuit. He was always prepared, and he always knew what he wanted. And he could back it up with quotes from his encyclopedic knowledge of films. He’d say, “This is a Kurosawa 150,” or “Joe Macdonald used the key light like this in such and such film.” The last part of the picture, from Cliff’s search for Charley to the final shootout in the brothel, is pure cinema at its best.

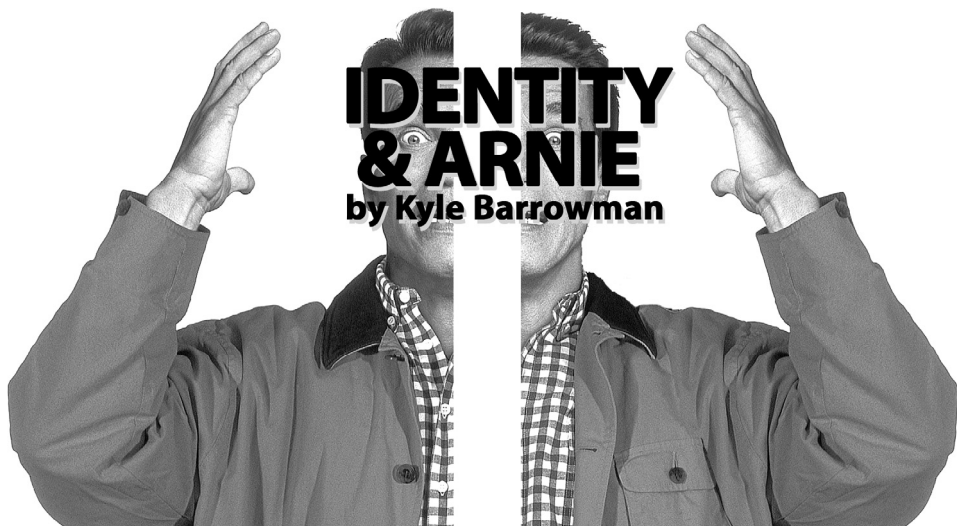
John and I later became neighbors when I moved out west, which in Los Angeles meant we were only a half hour’s drive from one another. We cooked up a lot of movie ideas, but we never got past the pitch stage. He spent the last 10 years of his life trying to get something going and he never gave up hope.

AR: *I’ve heard rumors that William Devane and Linda Haynes didn’t get along and even argued on set. Do you have any memories of that?*

HG: Bill Devane was the motor. The picture wouldn’t have been made without him. He had script approval, which was why I was hired. He had cast approval and read with all the auditioning actors, so I’m sure he approved Linda Haynes. Linda is perfect in the role. We could see how great she was in the dailies, and her performance didn’t have to be punched up in the editing room. Bill was tough and protected his character, but he never pulled the star act. He knew how he wanted to play the role, and he turned out to be right. Tension on a set is good; it shows that the actors care. In the end, everything Bill and Linda did was for the good of the picture.

AR: *The film disappeared for a while. Over the past few years, however, it’s been making a comeback as legions of new fans have discovered the film. Has the rediscovery and newfound popularity of *Rolling Thunder* surprised you?*

HG: I saw the movie the week it was released on a cold, rainy night in a theater on 42nd Street. Homeless guys were washing their socks in the bathroom; hookers were doing business in the balcony; a bag lady was having an animated conversation – with herself. But everybody stopped what they were doing to watch the movie. And a guy screamed, “Kill all them motherfuckers,” when the shootout began. So I knew we had a hit.



In *Cashiers du Cinemart* #13, Pat Bishow's "The Dichotomy of Arnold" explored a thematic trajectory discernible throughout the second half of Arnold Schwarzenegger's film career. Whereas in his book Arnold: Schwarzenegger and the Movies, Dr. Dave Saunders examines the sociopolitical framework of the Schwarzenegger canon, Bishow focuses on the narrative content of the films. In so doing, Bishow hits on an interesting point regarding Arnie's perverse preoccupation with play characters suffering identity crises.

Bishow centers his exploration on *True Lies*, asserting it is the "high point" of Arnold's cinematic identity struggles. I, however, believe the film most deserving of that distinction is the 1996 family comedy *Jingle All The Way*. As seen in the film's opening, Arnold's character, Howard Langston, is very similar to the character he played in *True Lies*, government spy Harry Tasker. Like Tasker, Langston is excellent in the "man's world," the workplace, but lousy at home with his wife and son. Just as with *True Lies* (as well as *Kindergarten Cop*, the film wherein Arnold first tackled this theme of poor parenting) in *Jingle All The Way* Arnold must find a way to offset his masculinity and "feminize" himself in order to become the ultimate father.

This masculinity dialectic is discussed at length by Susan Jeffords in her essay "The Big Switch: Hollywood Masculinity in the Nineties," from Film Theory Goes to the Movies. She points to the ending of *Kindergarten Cop*, which mirrors the ending of *Jingle All The Way*, and how it "anticipates the endings of many [90s] films that are resolved through a man's return to his family," which she believes is indicative of the message being conveyed in '90s action films that contradict the paradigmatic '80s action hero, that message being that the "emotionally whole and physically healed man of the '80s wants nothing more than to be a father, not a warrior/cop, after all" (p. 200).

This has an interesting application to *True Lies* and the argument put forth by Bishow. While acknowledging that *Jingle All The Way* most certainly falls in line with films like *Kindergarten Cop* and *True Lies* – films wherein Arnold is dialectically examining his status as an icon of masculinity – Bishow doesn't go far enough when he

posits that the narrative motivation of *Jingle All The Way* is merely the spectator's decision of whether Arnold is "a simple family man" or a "superhero (or superstar)." If I may be so presumptuous, I'd venture to say that, similar to what befell Dr. Saunders towards the end of his book, the generally low esteem in which Arnold's latter-career films are held explains why Bishow's engagement with *Jingle All The Way* is of such a perfunctory nature. I, unlike both of these men (and likely 99% of the currently living human population) have a great adoration of and respect for *Jingle All The Way*. In examining the film more closely, I have come to believe that it surpasses *True Lies* as the most entertaining and interesting treatment of this thematic thread. In *Jingle All The Way*, Arnold does not explore a crisis of identity for a character or even an allegorized "real life" crisis; rather, the identity with which Arnold is dialectically engaging is the "Arnie" identity, his celluloid alter ego who, at the time of *Jingle All The Way*, was going through a serious identity crisis from which many believe he has never recovered.

Concurrent with his seemingly endless search for a Turbo Man action figure, the storyline that anchors the film, *Jingle All The Way* also features a supremely intriguing subplot wherein the dissection of the Arnie phenomenon takes center stage. While running around the Twin Cities looking for the impossible-to-find action figure, Arnold is also forced to contend with comedy legend Phil Hartman, who plays divorced single parent Ted Maltin, a character Dr. Saunders writes is like Bill Paxton's hilarious scumbag car dealer character from *True Lies*, "crudely portrayed as a pitifully incompetent would-be suitor for Arnold's glamorous wife" (p. 192). The similarity is there, but contrary to Saunders's assertion that the character is "crudely portrayed," Hartman actually represents a very potent threat to Arnold's patriarchal rule.

Hartman serves as Arnold's polar opposite in the film, representing the object of every housewife's desire in the entire neighborhood. Not only is he a handyman, able to perform household repairs for the comedically oversexed mothers as well as put up the Christmas lights on the Langston house, a task the subpar father Arnold had neglected, he is also very feminine, mastering the kitchen just as easily, as seen in a scene where, in Arnold's absence, Hartman is baking cookies with Mrs. Langston. This particular scene is a hilarious representation of Hartman's feminine father usurping the patriarchy from the obsolete übermensch. Arnold calls home to speak to his wife, and he's shocked when Hartman answers the phone, informing him that he's helping his wife bake her famous sugar cookies. Arnold is horrified, even more so when he hears Hartman on the other end exclaiming in orgasmic ecstasy at the deliciousness of the cookies, metaphorically representing the consummation of his affair with the wife of the currently impotent Arnie. "Put that cookie down!" he yells with impotent indignation.



The final indictment of Arnold's disharmonious balance between masculinity and femininity also serves as the most precise reason for Arnold's diminishing popularity with action audiences by the '90s. After disrupting the sanctity of Hartman's home by attempting to steal the Turbo Man he bought for his own son from under his Christmas tree, Hartman, disgusted with Arnold, looks at him and says, "You can't bench press your way out of this one." The very thing that initially made Arnold a success, that gave birth to "Arnie." His masculine physicality makes him a failure now, both as the character Howard Langston and as the actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. By 1996, the age of the '80s blockbuster action extravaganzas was over and Arnold was struggling to find his place in the new era of modern action fare such as *Speed*, where the hero isn't of mythologically epic physical proportion, and *Independence Day*, the technologically-fueled science fiction actioner where the hero wasn't of Arnold's superhuman Aryan breed but was, of all things, a modern urban black man. Action films had shifted into a new era, and Arnold, the supremely masculine white ideal representing the quintessence of the '80s action icon, was trying to find his place. This uncertainty of filmic identity sees its most penetrating realization not in *True Lies*, but in *Jingle All The Way*.

Provided he can make it out of his current dilemma in one piece, it will be interesting to see where, if anywhere, "Arnie" fits in the cinema landscape and how, if at all, this intriguing narrative thread will evolve in future projects. One would think that, in this nostalgic, postmodern climate where returns to the past are the norm rather than novel, the premiere self-reflexive icon will be able to find a home and begin anew the dialectic pursuit of his forever enduring filmic identity.

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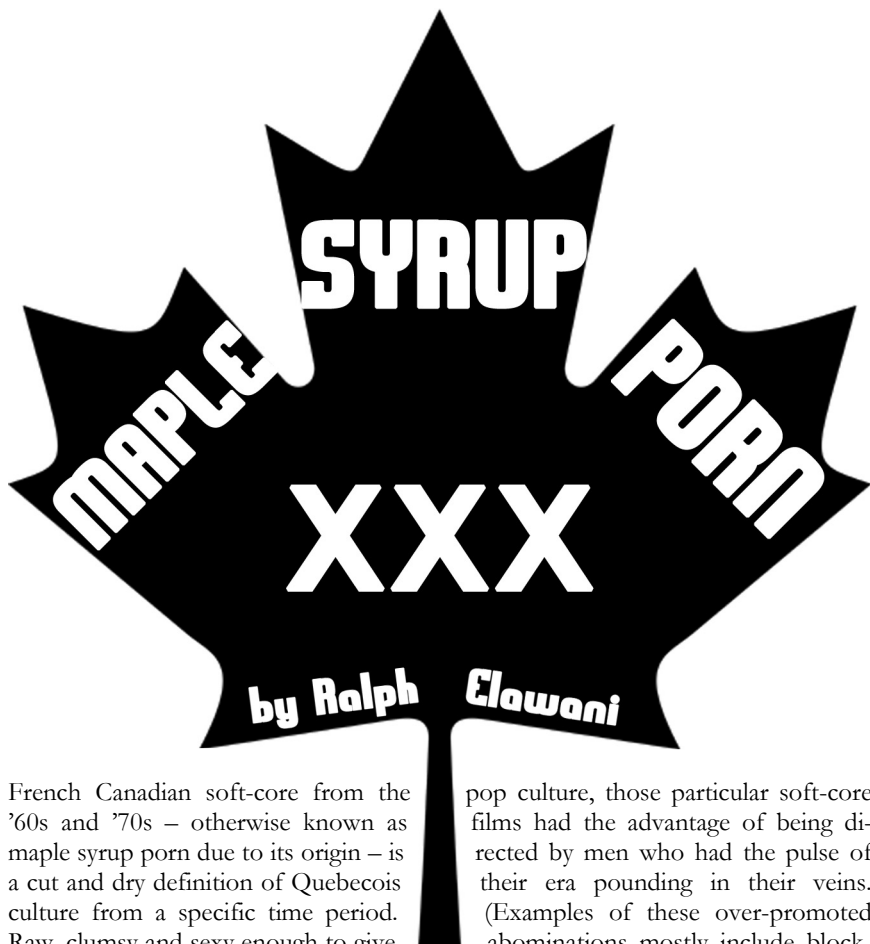


WHAT SORT OF WOMAN LISTENS TO UNCLE LEON AND THE ALIBIS?

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French Canadian soft-core from the '60s and '70s – otherwise known as maple syrup porn due to its origin – is a cut and dry definition of Quebecois culture from a specific time period. Raw, clumsy and sexy enough to give your average textbook French film a ride for its money, this sub-genre, often overlooked with extremely antagonistic prejudices, is nevertheless the work of some of *La Belle Province's* most decorated filmmakers as well as unsung heroes.

Although very easy to dismiss, these films actually provide the audience with a realistic account of the period during which they were made by encapsulating elements of underground music, mainstream culture, political undertones and geographic locations that take the viewers out of the urban setting so dear to bohemians and other *flâneurs*.

Unlike most of the swag that's been over-promoted in recent Quebecois

pop culture, those particular soft-core films had the advantage of being directed by men who had the pulse of their era pounding in their veins. (Examples of these over-promoted abominations mostly include blockbusters starring humorists or TV hosts in search of a second breath for their sagging careers such as: *Bon Cop Bad Cop*, *Les Boys*, *Les Dangeureux*, *L'Appât* and *Les Pieds dans le vide*).

In an interview that dates back to December 1972, filmmaker Gilles Carle told French-born Quebecois film critic, poet and novelist Emmanuel Cocke in *Un auteur collectif* that his films were not to be understood as topical but reflexive. "The only thing I can really do is tell the people that we're going to look at something together, and starting from there, we can all feel like we're maybe learning something. [...] I'm a bastard because I live in a bastardized

society. I do not aim at stylistic purity; I'm more into significant impurities [...] I'm not against the popularity of a film; I'm against its commercial exploitation." Basically, you need to have a culture to have a counter-culture.

Let's contextualize and get down to a few essentials.

OCTOBER 1970

Whereas 1968 is now regarded as a culminating point of surfeit throughout the world, Quebec had to wait two years to kick out the jams.

In order to cut a long story short, let's say that Le Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) which the government of Canada came to label as a terrorist group – in the same vein as the IRA, the Basque nationalists of the ETA and to some very exaggerated level, the Black Panthers – kidnapped James Richard Cross, the British Trade Commissioner, as he was leaving his home in October 1970. Five days later, the FLQ kidnapped the Minister of Labour and Vice-Premier of Quebec, Pierre Laporte. Following the denial of some of the FLQ's demands to the government – which included the liberation of political prisoners, the broadcast and publication of the FLQ Manifesto, and many more – Laporte was executed. The darkest corners of this already open closet full of skeletons are extremely well documented in Michel Brault's 1974 docu-fiction *Les Ordres*.

What ensued was to change the face of Canadian history forever. In the meantime, the federal government would invoke the War Measures Act. This was the only time; so far, the government used these powers during peacetime. The shit really hit the fan and if you ever encounter anyone from that era who had the slightest artistic inclinations – or leftist political allegiance – chances are that this person

will have a story about spending a night in jail.

A fork was stuck in the timeline of Quebec's history; not only setting the mood but carving a certain cynicism into following decades.

Subsequently, not to be understood as a kind of escapist move from the directors of the era, a crucial element emanating from many post-October Crisis films was the sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek humor, focusing on notorious quotable punch lines and anatomy than on cinematic frills. This move went the opposite direction from the *cinéma direct* of the '60s where the camera was a fly on the wall.

Indeed, a cinema of the people will always be superior to any topical, ego-centric or metaphysical cinema for one thing: human nature does not change. This is precisely where the value of exploitation films from Quebec resides; call it an ugly gimmick, but all of these films encompass so many different cultural spheres that your squabble gets lost in the downward spiral of foul condescension.

QUINTESSENTIALS

Maple syrup porn needs to be understood as the work of a very exclusive band of directors, namely Denis Héroux, Claude Fournier, Roger Cardinal, John Sole (a.k.a. Jason Johnson, a.k.a. John Sone) and to some extent a few others such as Jean Beaudin and Gilles Carle.

The milestone for maple syrup porn is a 1968 feature film directed by Denis Héroux and distributed by Cinépix, entitled *Valérie*, shot with a budget of less than \$100,000; some of which came from the Canadian Film Development Corporation.

Valérie tells the story of a woman (Danielle Ouimet) who leaves behind her life at a convent and ends up get-

ting a job as a stripper. Valerie then quickly morphs into a high-class hooker and ultimately, falls in love with an artist.

Héroux's next film, *L'Initiation*, varies the same theme: a young woman falls in love with a married French professor and both of them get it on at a hotel until they go back to their respective partners. Throw in three other young ladies with flirtatious aspirations and you get a film so deliciously sexy that it inspired the ideal patronym for Cinépix's music division (Initiation Records).

Claude Fournier's 1970 *Deux femmes en or* is another landmark of sexploitation films made in Quebec. Fournier's film tells the tale of two bored-to-death suburban housewives who decide to make use of their time alone in the comfort of their house by trying to seduce every single delivery man, plumber or repair guy who will dare show up on their porch. Featuring a theme song penned by Robert Charlebois – who was regarded as Quebec's own Bob Dylan/Frank Zappa at the time – *Deux femmes en or* differed from most sexploitation flicks, becoming an unbelievably high grossing sex comedy with more than *two million* tickets sold.

Fournier went on to direct a whole stretch of these sex comedies. Other titles include *La Pomme, la queue, les pépins*; *Les Chats Bottés* and *Les Chiens chauds*. In parallel fashion to the so-called lowbrow culture he produced and directed, Fournier became a re-

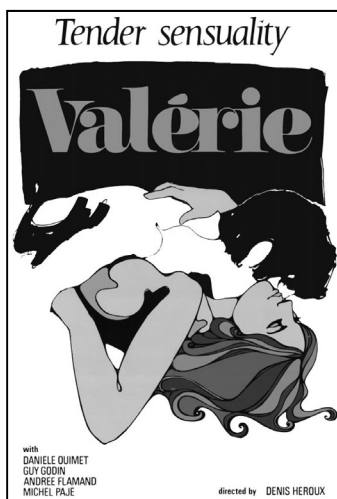
spected writer, biographer (René Lévesque), screenwriter and editor. During the last couple of years, Fournier and his wife Marie-Josée Raymond teamed up with Quebecois media corporation Quebecor and launched *Le Projet Elephant*, a philanthropic division of Quebecor Media dedicated solely to preserving Quebecois films and making them available to the public.

Roger Cardinal's 1971 decadent soft core epic *Après Ski* is by far the most well-known of this whole leg of sexploitation films. Starring Quebecois sweethearts Céline Lomez, Daniel Pi-

lon, Jeanine Sutto, Francine Grimaldi and a plethora of others including René Angélil (Céline Dion's hubby), this gem is celebrated as the ultimate bachelor flat flick ever made in Quebec.

Thanks to John Dunning (Denis Héroux's *Valérie* was named after Dunning's daughter) and André Link, Cinépix was by far the most

important production company when it came to maple syrup porn. Cinépix also released soundtracks on LPs and 45s, including the soundtrack to *Y'a plus de trou à Percé* and *Viens mon amour*. But most importantly, both of them were the driving force behind this whole genre. Furthermore, Cinépix's constant struggle against censors just went on to prove how the Catholic Church raised its ugly head and pulled the right strings whenever a film was deemed inappropriate content-wise in order to avoid its distribution.



SOUNDTRACKS

A very iconic element of these films is characteristically the soundtrack; not unlike other cult movies such as *Hell's Belles*, *The Adventurers* and *Shaft*. Still, the irony of it all is that in many cases musicians were not even credited. The

and vocal tracks by Céline Lomez, Mariette Lévesque, Marc Hamilton and Illustration.

And it's not like these musicians went on to become famous, record twenty number one hits, clean off their shoulders and drive away on Sunset Strip. For instance, Illustration's record



case of Toronto-based funk-rock group Illustration is a good example.

Recently reissued by Montreal-based record label *Les Disques Pluton*, *Après Ski*'s soundtrack features songs

actually kept them from putting their name on the *Après Ski* soundtrack back then. We're not talking about a band that had been relegated to the garage; *Rolling Stone* magazine

compared them to Blood, Sweat and Tears and Chicago.

Other unsung heroes – or vaguely well-known musicians who episodically rubbed shoulders with the soft-core crowd – include: François Cousineau, Michel Paje / Joe Gracy, Diane Dufresne, Patsy Gallant and François Dompierre.

THE MEETING

But since I've been tossing the coin and tricking it to fall exclusively on its bright side since the beginning of this article, here's the latent not-so-dark side of the story. In fact, anyone familiar with the film industry has probably seen it coming from miles away.

I spent an afternoon with an exceptionally decorated director of photography whose career ran parallel to the "exploitation network" in the social club world and happy hour-based microcosm of the film world, until it crossed Gilles Carle's path.

François Protat, director of photography on Michel Brault's *Les Ordres*, set the record straight on the climate surrounding that particular scene. Protat also worked on throngs of films by Gilles Carle and Jean-Claude Lord (whose 1976 dystopic feature about television, *Parlez-nous d'amour*, reached a cult status in the years that followed, thanks to quotable punch lines, courtesy of Quebec's most important playwright of the last 50 years, Michel Tremblay).

At some point during the interview, the latter grabbed my pen, wrote down: 15% 12% 10% and drew asterisks next to some of the names I had written on the paper. Protat said: these guys were able to buy luxurious penthouses in Paris and ranches 45 minutes

Must-See Maple Syrup Porn Flicks:

Valérie (Denis Héroux, 1968)
Après Ski (Roger Cardinal, 1971)
Deux femmes en or (Claude Fournier, 1970)
7 Fois par jour (Denis Héroux, 1971)
L'Amour humain (Denis Héroux, 1970)
L'Initiation (Denis Héroux, 1970)
Y'a plus de trou a Percé (John Sole, 1971)
Viens mon amour (John Sole, 1970)
Le Diable est parmi nous (Jean Beaudin, 1972)
La Mort d'un bûcheron (Gilles Carle, 1973)
Les Mâles (Gilles Carle, 1971)

away from Montreal by taking these percentages off the initial budget of films that were never produced. Add to this what used to be called "tax credits." That is, "Hey, Mr. Dentist, want to fund my film?" "Oh sure!" Bang, here are enough Turkish liras to settle down and write twenty more T&A features.

Well, that's nothing new under the sun, but when you consider that eight out of ten of these films never saw the light of day... well, it's overwhelming. At least, until you realize that's just the way it was.

Most of these guys are pretty well-off now and they made money on productions that were very often aborted or already dead in the shell. But to counter-balance this idea, it is also essential to know that these directors never really sought to build monuments out of exploitation films. Thus, it is necessary to take the whole thing with a grain of salt; in the larger frame of things, maple syrup porn was the tip of an iceberg that melted way before it could get to the Titanic. The importance of this whole genre has a lot more to do historically speaking than artistically or aesthetically speaking.

Like Watching a Laurel & Hardy Short Through a Fog of Deep Depression

by Mike Sullivan

Along with his sometime writing partner Chris Elliott, Adam Resnick could be considered one of the forefathers to today's alternative comedy movement. Starting off as a writer during the golden years of *Late Night with David Letterman*, Adam went on to co-create *Get a Life* with Elliott, write and co-executive produce episodes of *The Larry Sanders Show* and, most significantly, serve as the writer/director behind one of the most underrated films of the '90s *Cabin Boy*. A talented comedy writer with an uncanny knack for producing material that is both absurd yet cynical, Adam's projects tend to be overlooked (*The High Life*) or needlessly demonized by critics (*Death to Smoochy* and *Lucky Numbers*). Although he rarely gives out interviews, Adam was kind enough to candidly discuss his incredible career with me.

Mike Sullivan: *How did you become a writer at Letterman?*

Adam Resnick: I started out as an intern and began slipping material to Dave's assistant. She passed it along to him and he really liked it. Eventually I was hired as a writer. The office felt like

a clubhouse in those days. It was so much fun. Working for Dave will always be the greatest job I ever had.

MS: *I take it this is where you first met Chris Elliott?*

AR: Yeah. At a certain point, Chris and I built up a close friendship and we started writing his stuff together. I got there around the time he was doing "The Guy under the Seats" and was already a big fan of his from watching all those early characters he did on *Late Night*. It was such strange shit. I had never seen anything like it.

MS: *Which sketches did you and Chris collaborate on?*

AR: We wrote all the Marlon Brando pieces, Morton Downy Jr., and tons of stuff that I can't even remember. Chris was a total original. He wasn't like Andy Kaufman, but he had that same polarizing effect on an audience. When I first met him I was kind of stunned to realize how much acting went into that character he did on the show. I expected him to be brooding prick in real life. You know, a Michael O'Donoghue type. But he's nothing like that. I've always felt that Chris was ahead of the curve; he was the beginning of something. Years later a lot of guys were doing the "cocky idiot" thing that Chris had sort of created and became very successful. They took it and made it more user-friendly...added a few fart jokes for the kids. Guys like Chris and Andy Kaufman were really pure. It was comedic performance art. But performance art won't buy you a Porsche. Farting does. I think Ayn Rand said that.

MS: *It's always farts and money with those Objectivists. After your days on Letterman you went on to create Get a Life with Chris Elliott. What can you tell us about its development?*

AR: Back in 1989, I guess it was, Fox approached Chris about doing a show for them. Chris asked me if I would write it with him and I said yes but didn't think anything would come of it. Truthfully, I had no interest in writing sitcoms and didn't want to leave New York. But a sitcom with Chris, maybe it could be something cool. The other big problem was, *Late Night* had been my home for so many years and the thought of leaving it was really difficult. I had grown really close to Dave and to this day I think about him a lot. He changed my life. But then you start getting paranoid that you're passing up an opportunity and all that shit.

Anyway, Chris and I started tossing around ideas. One of our first ideas was Marlon Brando living with a family. Basically *Mr. Mom* starring Chris as Marlon Brando. I think that was for our own amusement more than anything. Eventually we latched onto the notion – I think it was Chris's idea – of a take-off of a 1950s family sitcom like *Leave it to Beaver*. Once we zeroed in on that, the rest came pretty quickly – the surreal tone, the characters, the idea of a thirty-year-old paper boy still living with his parents, using music montages in each episode, everything fell into place. Chris even came up with the title and the idea of using "Stand" [by R.E.M.] for the opening credits. It was all there.

MS: *Did Fox commit to the pilot at this point?*

AR: No, but I seem to remember that they green-lit it fairly quickly after the first draft. You end up pandering to the network on a pilot script because you want them to pick the show up. So there were notes and stuff that Chris and I weren't happy about, but we did them. Personally, I always hated the *Get a Life* pilot. It's cutesy and kind of sweet

at times...not at all what we envisioned back in New York.

MS: *Fox seemed to like it enough to go ahead with the series.*

AR: Right, that was the problem. They liked the sweet nature of Chris's character in the pilot. They wanted more of that. Chris and I knew we had to establish the tone of the show we envisioned or it was going to be an embarrassment. So, over a weekend, we wrote the male model episode. For us, *that* was *Get a Life*. That's also when the problems with the network started. They were very confused. There was a sequence at the end of that script where Chris struts down a fashion show runway, and after reading it, one of the executives called up and said, "I don't get it. So he turns into a fag at the end?"

MS: *Yikes. So I guess it was a little too weird for them?*

AR: I guess, and apparently a little too faggy. But a lot of the episodes were based on something real in Chris's life. Like the episode where his character was trying to get his driver's license. In real life at that time, Chris was just getting his driver's license. He grew up in New York, he never needed to drive before. The executives hated the idea and told us it was unrealistic and pathetic. The word "pathetic" came up a lot. One of them said, "What thirty year old man would just be getting his driver's license?" Chris raised his hand and said, "Uh, that would be me."

MS: *What can you tell us about the creation of Cabin Boy?*

AR: One day, out of the blue, Tim Burton called Chris. He wanted to meet with us about doing a project together because he was big fan of Chris's from the Letterman days and he really liked *Get a Life*. At the time he was prepping

Batman Returns and for his next movie he wanted to do something small again like *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*. Chris and I came up with an idea that was a mix between *Captains Courageous* and the Ray Harryhausen movies. Tim really liked it so Chris and I fleshed out the story and then I went off and wrote the script.

MS: *It sounds like a typical Tim Burton movie.*

AR: Well, we designed it to be a Tim Burton movie. He was loving the idea every step of the way. But by the time I was finished, he had changed his mind about wanting to direct a small film. He loved the script, though, and really wanted to get it made. He championed the idea of me directing it instead. I never asked to direct it, never thought about directing it... This is where everyone says to themselves, "Boy, how cool would it have been if Tim Burton had directed *Cabin Boy*." I'm one of those people, by the way. When Tim told me he wanted me to direct it, it was pretty exciting, but I distinctly remember thinking this could be a mistake. The script was written specifically for him. If I never met Tim, and had set out to write something for myself to direct, the last thing I would've written is *Cabin Boy*. It was a big lesson: Never do something just for the opportunity.

MS: *It sounds like it all came together pretty quickly.*

AR: Well, during that time, Disney was

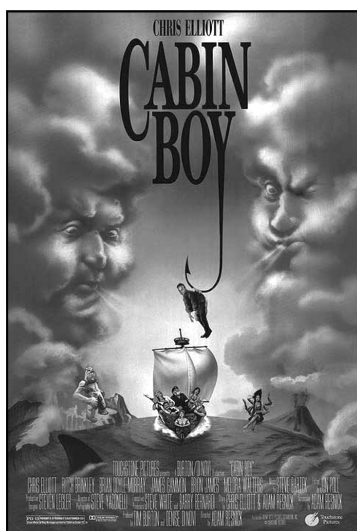
desperate to make a deal with Tim, so they tried to entice him over by making a few of his odd pet projects. *Ed Wood* was one, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was another and *Cabin Boy*. They did fine on the first two.

MS: *Well, I think in the long run it's going to work out for them.*

AR: Actually, I think it's still considered an embarrassment over there. Perhaps the darkest moment in Disney history, I don't know.

MS: *Tell me a little more about how you came up with the look of the movie.*

AR: The film was always supposed to have a tacky, artificial look but there were times when it was too tacky and artificial looking for my tastes and that was mostly due to the budget; particularly the scene where Chris is going delirious on the raft. The backdrop is right up against the tank and there was a seam running down the middle of it. You can



kind of see it in the movie. There was always something like that. It was always like, "Wait a minute – why did the cave that we designed to look really cool end up looking like something from *Gilligan's Island*?" There would be a lot of shrugging and double talk and I was too green and naïve to know better.

MS: *What was the shooting process like?*

AR: It was not a good time. When we went into pre-production, I heard through the grapevine that the executive producer absolutely hated the

script and was only doing the job as a favor to someone. So we were off to a wonderful start. Keep in mind, I was a first time director. There were lots of times I needed help and wished I had a little more support from some people that were around during the process. Having said that, anything that sucks about the movie, or anything that people don't like, I take complete responsibility for. If only Tim had directed it.

MS: *Oh, I think you're being too hard on yourself. I was re-watching Cabin Boy recently and the film has this unique storybook quality to it. The sets are artificial and fake but in a good way. There's a proto-Wes Anderson quality behind Cabin Boy.*

AR: Actually I was going for a storybook feel. Like the opening shot of the gates revealing the school courtyard. Fuck, maybe I am being too hard on myself. Is there a chance *Cabin Boy* was actually a hit?

MS: *Over the years Cabin Boy has evolved into a respected cult bit. How does that make you feel?*

AR: *Cabin Boy* is a tough one. I still don't know how I feel about it. It's hard to lose sight of the fact that so many people have an intense hatred for it. Or at least they did when it came out. Chris and I sometimes talk about writing the behind-the-scenes *Cabin Boy* book, which I think would be really funny, but I don't think there's anyone clamoring for that.

MS: *I would read that book.*

AR: I suddenly smell money.

MS: *When did the Disney executives see the finished film?*

AR: I remember showing the first cut to Jeffrey Katzenburg and a few executives in a screening room at Disney. There were some people who legiti-

mately laughed throughout the screening but when the lights came up there was dead silence. You could just tell that something was off. I was sitting four seats down from Jeff Katzenburg and he announced, "Well, it's the weirdest movie we ever made," and then he turned to me said, "You're a sick fuck." There was a bit of humor in his voice, but it felt ominous in that room. I really knew something was up when he declared he had no notes. I remember thinking, "Gee, really? No notes? Did the first cut of *The Lion King* go this well?" I asked one of the producers what it meant and they gave me some answer like, "We'll have to wait and see." So that's what we did until the first preview screening. And then we *saw*, very clearly, that we had a fucking disaster on our hands. Or rather, my hands and Chris's hands. All the producers and everyone else connected to this thing ran for the hills. In the annals history, I don't think people have ever disassociated themselves from anything so quickly.

MS: *What exactly happened in that first audience preview?*

AR: I'd say at least half the theater cleared out during the first 20 minutes. I remember feeling like I was going to puke. The funny thing is, I actually thought it would play well! But they brought in a Pasadena audience who thought they were going to see *Splash* or something like that. It wasn't like they saw the movie and thought, "I didn't care for it" or "Boy, that sucked"...they actually felt violated. It pissed them off. Guys grabbed their dates by the arm and dragged them out of the theater like the movie had just raped them. Very, very strange. To this day, I don't really get it.

MS: *I take it Disney wasn't pleased after the*

test screening?

AR: They were a little cross, yes. Keep in mind, it was a cheap movie to make, but for them, there was the embarrassment factor. But it gets even better – soon afterwards, Tim decided to blow off Disney and set up a deal at Warner Brothers.

So basically now Jeff Katzenberg is looking in my direction and thinking, “How the fuck did I get stuck with this guy and his weird movie?” And I can’t stress this enough: *Cabin Boy* was only made because they were kissing Tim’s ass hoping he’d make a deal there. There is no way that movie would have been made anywhere under any other circumstances.

MS: Tell me about the reaction when the movie finally came out.

AR: I’d have to do some research on the internet, but from what I recall, it didn’t do very well.

MS: Is that something you expected?

AR: Chris and I knew it was going to tank, but I don’t think either of us was prepared for the venom, the absolute anger over this silly little B movie starring Chris Elliott. It’s not like it was some huge event that was highly anticipated by the movie going public like *Godfather 3* and didn’t meet their expectations. It wasn’t a big movie like *Ishtar* or *Heaven’s Gate*. Why did so many people make a big deal out of it? I still don’t know. Somehow *Cabin Boy* struck a nerve in the collective conscience of the American public and reminded them of everything they hate in life. That’s just my theory. I’m still

waiting for a proper study.

Then there were the reviews. Good Christ. They were so proactively vicious. What bug did we put up everyone’s ass to deserve that level of cruelty? The press department at Disney kept faxing me each bad review which really pissed me off.

MS: Why did they keep doing that? Was it just to be spiteful?

AR: I don’t know. My heart would jump every time I’d hear the fax machine click on. I’d watch as it slowly came out, usually headline first: “*CABIN BOY SINKS.*” Oh, they had a field day with those nautical puns.

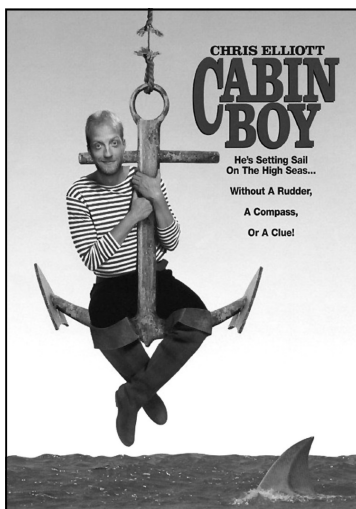
MS: Nautical puns are difficult to resist. You gave them a very special gift.

AR: Yeah, I’m always thinking of others. I was actually embarrassed to leave my apartment for a while. My neighbors in the hallway would avert their eyes when they saw me. I don’t know, a lot of it was

in my head, I guess. I was going nuts, like Roman Polanski in *The Tenant*. But on the other hand, there was a reality to it. There was an unusual and unnatural spotlight on this movie. Chris felt it too.

MS: Which is insane. I mean it’s not like you guys were these huge –

AR: Exactly! Even Pauley Shore movies were allowed to come and go, but *Cabin Boy* continued to be referenced for quite a period after it came out. Just when I thought I’d heard the last of it, there’d be something else. I remember



reading some article – I think it was in *The New York Times* – it was a cynical view of the idea of extended director cuts that were popping up on laser discs at the time. And the last line of the article said something snarky like, “I suppose it won’t be long before we’ll even see the director’s cut of *Cabin Boy*.” That kind of shit happened all the time.

MS: *Is there hope for a deluxe DVD in the future?*

AR: A few years ago, I asked my agent to check in with their home video department and see if there was any chance they might put out a newer edition of the DVD. For me and Chris, it’s mostly about the cover. The artwork is so horrible. They slapped his head on another guy’s body and he’s hanging from an anchor. So shitty and stupid looking. Anyway, the guy at Disney basically said that they don’t sell enough copies of *Cabin Boy* to justify the expense of redesigning the artwork. I think they took the matter directly to the shareholders.

MS: *That artwork is awful. It has this early ’90s, hastily photo-shopped by a ten year old feel.*

AR: That’s an insult to ten year-olds and the early ’90s.

MS: *Everybody seems to love that Letterman cameo.*

AR: Every audience went nuts for that scene. They’d applaud at the end. But it was at the top of the movie and a sort of tension would set in as things went on and people realized Dave wasn’t coming back. Dave is so fucking funny. Chris and I will never be able to thank him enough for agreeing to be in it.

MS: *What did you think of that “Wanna Buy a Monkey” sketch that ran during the*

1995 Oscar telecast?

AR: Dave was hosting the Oscars and he called me about this idea he had to get a bunch of actors to recite his “Wanna buy a monkey?” line from the film. He wanted to know if it would bother me, which was really considerate of him. So I said sure, go do it, because, you know, to this day, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for Dave. He also asked me if I’d shoot some of the actors for the piece, and I did that.

MS: *Seems like you were a little ambivalent about it.*

AR: Yeah, I was because, truthfully, it did kind of bother me. I just wanted *Cabin Boy* dead and buried at that point. I didn’t want people to be reminded of it.

MS: *That must have been tough since you felt so close to Dave.*

AR: For Dave, it was just about making fun of himself. He probably didn’t realize how fucked up I still was. And he did ask me first. I could’ve said no. Ultimately, there was just no upside to it for me and Chris. We weren’t able to score “cool points” – to use the slang of the street – for poking fun at ourselves. You know, look at Robert DeNiro at the Golden Globes, cracking jokes about *Little Fockers*...

MS: *Scoring cool points.*

AR: Yup.

MS: *Which actors did you shoot for the piece? If I could torture you a bit further.*

AR: I kind of forget. Tom Hanks, Madonna, I forget who else. Michael Keaton. Hanks and Keaton are really nice guys.

MS: *What about Madonna?*

AR: She was actually kind of cool, which I didn’t expect. I remember ask-

ing her if she got her dress from The Limited which seemed to amuse her.

MS: *So after all these years, how do you feel about Cabin Boy?*

AR: I guess the best thing I can say about is, I don't think about it anymore. Chris and I are really happy that there seems to be a small cult of *Cabin Boy* fans out there. The Onion did a few screenings here in New York not so long ago and Chris and I did a Q&A afterwards. The place was packed – not a huge theater, of course – but there was such a big response to it. And the audience was so nice afterwards. We went through the whole story, the whole *Cabin Boy* ordeal, and I remember a girl coming up to me afterwards and telling me I should feel proud and not to be so hard on myself. It was one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. But since I'm crazy, those kinds of things never stick in my head. Just the bad stuff.

MS: *You should be proud. Cabin Boy was one of the best comedies of the '90s*

AR: Jesus, you really think that? Dude, if only you wrote for *The New Yorker*. But thanks.

MS: *When was the last time you watched Cabin Boy?*

AR: I haven't seen it since the last color correction in post-production. And that was without sound. I've caught a few minutes of it here and there when it's on cable. And honestly, I kind of like what I see. But I don't watch too long. I get out fast. It's like sticking in black-jack.

It took a long time, but I think Chris and I are both fine with it now. Even proud of it, I guess. We set out to make a strange comedy and that's what it is. It absolutely could have been better, but maybe the rough edges work in its

favor. We used to talk about things like, "Was the Freddy Bartholomew accent the thing people really hated? Or maybe the short pants and wig?" Who the fuck knows? It's just great not to think about it anymore. I'm gonna put a gun in my mouth.

MS: *I like that foppish accent.*

AR: Well, there you go. A happy ending after all.

MS: *I think it's one of the things that adds to the overall weirdness. In a fun, silly way.*

AR: I suppose we'll never crack the enigma of the accent. I do think even some *Get a Life* fans had a problem with it, but at the end of the day, I think Chris's performance – and the accent – are hilarious. I think he's brilliant in *Cabin Boy*. I'm still his biggest fan.

MS: *Just for a moment I want to talk about The High Life. During a brief time in the '90s this clever, pitch black parody of fifties sitcoms used to follow Mr. Show on HBO. To me, it was the strongest comedy block on television at that time.*

AR: Thanks. Not many people saw *The High Life*. I was really proud of that one. Plus I was working with Dave again. His company produced it, so that made me feel really good. We only did eight episodes. I remember *The New York Times* gave it a glowing review and the last line was, "Adam Resnick can now almost be forgiven for *Cabin Boy*." Why was *Cabin Boy* even mentioned? See what I mean? And God forbid it said I *was* forgiven, but no, *almost* forgiven. There was another *High Life* review I really liked that said it was "like watching a Laurel and Hardy short through the fog of a deep depression."

MS: *Was it always your plan to recast Steve Mellor as a different villain every week?*

AR: I love what Steve did on that

show. He was great. The decision to keep recasting him wasn't planned. It sort of came to me during the pilot. I loved his performance as the lead Klansman so much I started thinking about how I could bring him back. Obviously there can't be a Klansman character every week. So I decided to make him a different antagonist each episode. That guy is so funny.

The whole cast was great and I really loved being able to work with people like JK Simmons and Jane Krakowski. There were a lot of people like that. Real New York character actors. Of course, they're now big time actors.

MS: *What can you tell us about Lucky Numbers?*

AR: For me, that one didn't work. I was really pleased with my script, but, you know, if you sell a script you have to realize that's pretty much the end of your involvement. I had nothing much to do with it after that. The title, by the way, was *Numbers*. I always hated that "Lucky" they put in front of it. Anyway, not my movie.

MS: *Did you originally write Lucky Numbers with Chris Elliott?*

AR: No. Although, there was a part I wanted Chris for but I was powerless to do anything about it. I wrote Bill Pullman's role for Chris. Bill Pullman was actually funny in the role. Anyway, the movie really doesn't feel anything like what I wrote. It was supposed to be a dark comedy, but...whatever. Wah wah wah. Fucking writers. Buncha crybabies.

MS: *I think it still reflects the feeling of a dark comedy. I don't think that Nora Ephron was the best choice for it but I still say that the movie works in a lot of ways.*

AR: That's nice to hear. I don't think I agree, but I guess there's a couple of

scenes that work. I know what you mean about Nora. She's great at what she does, but my script was not what she does. I guess she wanted to try something different, but it was a mismatch of sensibilities. It wasn't right. Nora was always nice to me though.

Numbers should have been a very inexpensive indie movie. But I sold it to a studio, and it ballooned into a big expensive star vehicle with a star director. The tone of the material didn't call for all that. That was my fault. I didn't have to sell it to a studio, but I did. The studios are not in the business of making small movies. I completely get that and respect that.

MS: *I know the movie as supposed to take place in Harrisburg but when I watched it I thought it was shot in Chicago and they were just saying it was Harrisburg.*

AR: You're killing me. I grew up in Harrisburg and the movie is set there because it's based on a true story of some people who rigged the state lottery. It took place in Central Pennsylvania. The script was very specific in describing the locations and gave a real feel for the area, which of course, I was very familiar with. During pre-production I went back to Pennsylvania and took a lot photographs of the news station, where most of the film is set, and the squat little buildings in the neighborhood and stuff like that. All very authentic. But Nora obviously didn't want to go for that kind of shabby realism, so she did the impossible – she made Harrisburg look beautiful. She found a gleaming black building across the river and made that the news station. Again, it's her movie, but it's not what I had in mind.

MS: *I do really believe that the writing really shines through on Lucky Numbers. It's a smart funny movie.*

AR: You're the first person who's ever told me that, so I fear you're just being a gentleman. But that's okay. It's an ugly world. We need more gentlemen.

MS: *When I told people I was interviewing the guy who wrote Death to Smoochy, nine times out of ten their eyes lit up and they told me they loved that movie. Critics seemed to have missed the point. They assumed Death to Smoochy was a Barney parody when it really wasn't.*

AR: The Barney stuff surprised me because I never thought about Barney when writing that movie. It was just supposed to be a generic looking kids' show character. I never pictured him looking quite the way he ended up. In the script, I think he was orange, sort of a *New Zoo Review* generic puffy animal suit type guy. But whoever decided to make him purple...anyway, I can see how it screamed Barney.

Interestingly (or not) when I first started thinking about the idea, it was about a man and a woman, two hippie types, who come up with a costumed animal character that performs at charity events and children's hospitals. It wasn't about money or anything. Just to do something nice. Then, somehow, the woman winds up in the Congo as a missionary. Why, I don't know. Meanwhile, back in the states, the guy she worked with sells the character to TV and it becomes a huge hit. He becomes rich. Eventually word of this reaches the Congo and the missionary abandons God to claim her share of the profits. Then it turns into a big courtroom drama like *Inherit the Wind*. For some reason, I decided to keep thinking.

MS: *Wow, I like that idea! How did that turn into what we know as Death to Smoochy?*

AR: Actually, there was another version

after that. It kept evolving. It was about a rivalry between two puppet shows. Back in the fifties there was *Howdy Doo-dy* who was really popular and another puppet show, *Rootie Kazootie*, that was less popular. I was going to write a movie about two fictitious puppets and the bitter rivalry between the two shows, the creators and producers and stuff. I wanted it to feel like *Sweet Smell of Success* in the world of 1950s children's television.

MS: *That's a great idea. That could have been a cool movie too.*

AR: Yeah, maybe I fucked up. But I knew I could never get that movie made; a period piece about rival puppet shows. As I kept thinking about the idea it evolved into what it finally became. I was really happy with the script. It retained the *Sweet Smell of Success* thing that I liked. But the movie, well... Here we go again.

MS: *It didn't turn out the way you had hoped?*

AR: Again, I have to be clear, I didn't direct the movie, so that's how it goes. Danny [DeVito]'s sensibilities didn't always match mine and vice versa. *Smoochy* was closer to what I intended than *Numbers*, but it's frustrating. When you're writing a screenplay, you hope the movie comes out the way you envisioned it. Or even better – you hope the director brings his own thing – something special – that elevates the material and the movie turns out superior to what you originally imagined.

MS: *What didn't work for you in Death to Smoochy?*

AR: Oh, I don't know. I really hate talking about this. At a certain point you gotta put this shit behind you. It just wasn't what I pictured. It's kind of shrill. I'm sure there were some script problems too that never got solved. It's

a flawed movie. Some of the reviews used terms like “missed opportunity” and in my mind that’s what *Smoochy* is.

MS: *I do agree with you that Smoochy is flawed. But I do believe that the good elements outweigh the bad. It’s a movie I keep coming back to.*

AR: No, it’s not a complete piece of shit, I’ll give you that. But it ain’t *Dr. Strangelove* either.

MS: *Here’s how I see it. I think comedy by its very nature is inconsistent. Even the best comedies can be very hit or miss. For me if there’s enough funny bits in a comedy then it’s a good comedy.*

AR: That’s fair. I totally agree with that. There are a lot of movies I like that I watch over and over that aren’t perfect. But when it comes to stuff I’ve been involved with I can’t be that rational. I can’t feel anything other than disappointment. But there is a lot in *Smoochy* I think is good. Edward Norton, Robin Williams, Katherine Keener – great performances all around. I don’t know, maybe a near miss is harder to deal with than an out-and-out disaster. I should watch it again sometime.

MS: *I love the songs you wrote for the movie particularly “My Step-Dad’s Not Mean He’s Just Adjusting.”*

AR: I really enjoyed writing those songs. They always got big laughs in the test screenings which I never expected.

MS: *I get the sense you’re not in love with the film industry.*

AR: Like a lot of writers, I’m stuck between trying to write what excites me, and having to make a living. Usually what excites me may not be commercial enough. So you end up compromising. Maybe you write a spec that you

think will sell even though you’re not 100% creatively invested in it. Things like that. But overall, I’m lucky that I can make money doing the only thing I know how to do. And despite the Hollywood cliché, most of the people I’ve dealt with over the years, the studio people and so forth, have been pretty decent. With the occasional prick tossed into the mix to keep things lively.

MS: *Would you like to direct again?*

AR: Ultimately I consider myself a writer. With *Cabin Boy* – even before I knew how things would end up – I realized I didn’t like directing. I’m extremely asocial. Always have been. With directing, it’s all these fucking meetings and questions and problem solving and “how big should the ice monster be in relationship to the Filthy Whore [the name of the boat in *Cabin Boy*]...” I’m not managerial by nature. I hate people asking me questions. I had enough of that in high school.

MS: *For all its intentional tackiness, Cabin Boy still had a fair amount of special effects to contend with.*

AR: Right, I mean, we’re not exactly talking *Inception*, but there were effects and a lot of technical decisions that had to be made. And I’m the least technical person you’ll ever meet. I still have an AOL account. But I do sometimes wonder if my first shot at directing had been something simpler – and less retarded – maybe I would have had a better time. I don’t completely rule out taking another stab at it, but it would have to be something really small. Still, I’d much rather have a great collaboration with a director where we’re creatively in sync. If a writer is lucky enough to find that relationship, that’s the home run.

I’m gonna jump out the window.



Georgia Peaches (Daniel Haller, 1980)

In her 1997 autobiography Nickel Dreams, country music legend Tanya Tucker tells how during the early days of her career she was managed by Delores Fuller, erstwhile Ed Wood girlfriend and featured

player in *Glen or Glenda?* and *Bride of the Monster*. Unfortunately, being alone with Fuller eventually made the teenage Tanya so nervous her hands and feet would begin to itch uncontrollably, and they had to part ways. But by 1980, Tanya had overcome this psychosomatic aversion to cult movie luminaries to star in the TV movie *Georgia Peaches*, produced by Roger Corman and directed by Daniel Haller of *The Dunwich Horror* and *Die, Monster, Die!* fame.

Georgia Peaches is the tale of a countrified, *Mod Squad*-style team of young sexy crime fighters portrayed by the once in a lifetime cast of Tanya Tucker, Berlin front-woman Terri Nunn, and *Battlestar Galactica*/*The A-Team* star Dirk Benedict. Before they are lassoed into the law and order game, super-cute grease monkey Sue Lynn Peach (Nunn) busies herself managing Georgia Peaches Automotive, boyfriend Dusty Tyree (Benedict) runs moonshine in his souped-up, gadget-laden Trans Am, and Sue Lynn's sister Lorette Peach (top billed Tanya) struggles to make it as a country singer. But sadistic local crime queen Vivian Stark (Sally Kirkland) wants to buy Georgia Peaches Automotive to use as a front for her stolen car racket, and when Sue Lynn refuses to sell Stark frames the trio for grand theft auto. "Looks like there's some rotten peaches in the barrel!" the sheriff exclaims as he leads them away.

Lorette, Sue Lynn and Dusty are bailed out by U.S. Treasury Agent Randolph Dukane (Lane Smith), who offers them their freedom if they join him in his crusade against "the illicit transportation of tobacco products in order to avoid state excise tax... bootleg butts!" The gang is a bit underwhelmed to be drafted into this particular war but become undercover agents anyway. Dusty hires on at a local sinister trucking company, while Lorette and Sue Lynn infiltrate the local nightclub scene as the spandex pants-wearing, harmonizing Honeysuckle Sisters. Soon the stakes are as high as the cigarette taxes when they stumble upon Vivian Stark's role in what Dukane describes as "a crime ring so insidious that its tentacles spread to every state east of the Mississippi." Lorette is taken hostage by Stark and her yahoo henchmen, and soon the small screen explodes with van crashes, helicopter crashes, and fiery motorcycle action courtesy of Terri Nunn's stunt double.

Besides Corman and Haller, another notable name behind the scenes is William Hjortsberg, who co-wrote the script. Hjortsberg is best known for his novel *Falling Angel*, the basis for the Alan Parker movie *Angel Heart*. Stick around for the end credits and you'll see Corman alumni Gale Ann Hurd (billed as just Gale Hurd) credited as production coordinator. And if you only know Terri Nunn from Berlin's icy new wave classics like "The Metro" or "Sex (I'm A...)" you may find it hard to imagine her as a sweet, down-home country girl, but she pulls it off with ease.



Nunn was pretty busy as an actress before Berlin took off (her audition for the role of Princess Leia is on YouTube) and it's too bad she didn't stick with it.

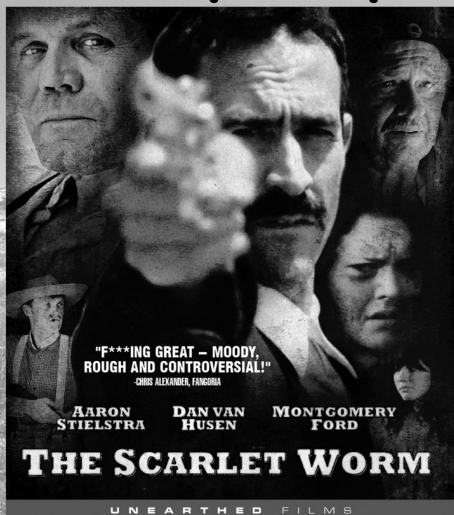
Georgia Peaches is fun entry in the rural car crash subgenre, if on the tame side due to network TV standards and practices restrictions. But if you're a Tanya Tucker fan, it is a must see. Tanya was also doing quite a bit of acting at this time, appearing on shows like *Fantasy Island* and the TV movie *Amateur Night at the Dixie Bar & Grill*, and even studied briefly with Lee Strasberg. But as she puts it in Nickel Dreams, she was "naturally lazy" and didn't like to work at things that didn't come naturally to her: "I never had the same drive to act as I did to sing." But Tanya totally got the tone of *Georgia Peaches*, playing it just straight enough while clearly having a good time with the more outlandish moments, like when Stark stuffs Lorette into a tiny freezer after kidnapping her, then later drags her around by a rope through the water as her yacht cruises along the coast! Best of all, Tanya gets to do what *does* come naturally to her, sing several songs in the nightclub scenes (well, lip sync, technically), including a rendition of her hit "San Antonio Stroll."

Georgia Peaches was released on VHS as *Follow that Car* (I would have gone with *Bootleg Butts* as an alternate title, maybe with a shot of Tanya in her denim shorts on the video box) and is now available on DVD as part of Shout Factory's *Roger Corman's Cult Classics* line, part of a three movie set along with *The Great Texas Dynamite Chase*, which I reviewed in *Cashiers du Cinemart* #10, and *Smokey Bites the Dust*, which I hope to review in *Cashiers du Cinemart* #17, if there ever is one (never say never).

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Brian Gibson's 1980 film *Breaking Glass* has been called "a post-punk *A Star Is Born*," a perfect description given how it chronicles the meteoric rise and subsequent fall of a performer struggling to exorcise her creative demons. Set in a bleak pre-Thatcherite England overwhelmed by social upheaval – including labor strikes and neo-Nazis aplenty – the movie stars Hazel O'Connor as Kate, an idealistic and (at first anyways) purely art-driven singer-songwriter who spends her days sleep-walking through her job at a gas station. At nights in her dingy apartment she writes songs that reflect her anger with what she feels is the increasingly robotic nature of the human experience. Although fame is the last thing on her mind, her songs have a strange resonance that seem to perfectly capture the cultural zeitgeist.

Enter Danny (Phil Daniels of *Quadrophenia* fame), a small-time promoter who squeaks out a living by helping record companies fix the music charts, buying up all the copies of certain singles in local stores. When he encounters Kate, he is immediately stricken by her musical abilities and her unique sense of personal style. (Bizarre Kabuki-style makeup and thrown-together outfits are clearly the hallmark of an individual who cares more about fixing social ills than dressing to conform). Although he is small potatoes industry-wise, Danny realizes that beneath her shell Kate has true talent and originality. They form a friendship and Danny helps Kate audition band members for a new group named Breaking Glass.

After a rather disastrous premiere performance, Danny blackmails his record label contacts into attending a high-profile London concert he has arranged, the band's big break is seemingly cut short when a power outage occurs during their set. Undeterred, Kate continues singing her disgust with the authority anthem "Who Needs It" without the aid of electricity. The power of her performance wins over the rowdy crowd and the industry execs, earning the band a record contract. They quickly discover that the labels are more interested in commodity than creativity (one weaseley exec suggests Kate remove the word "arse" from her song "Big Brother" in order to make it more radio-friendly). Meanwhile, forces within the band and from the label begin moving against Danny, who at this point has become the group's biggest advocate/fan.

As the label schemes to make Kate the focus of the group and diminish her musical cohorts' role to that of glorified session musicians, conflicts come to a

head. Danny reaches his boiling point and quits. This paves the way for Woods (Jon Finch) – a sleazy, successful record producer – to take over his position...both personally and professionally. Woods doesn't get the Kate that Danny fell in love with, but instead a shell of her former self that is slowly sinking into madness.

Manipulated by everyone around her, an addled Kate does a radio show appearance in which she (awesomely) rambles about robots taking over before Danny calls in to accuse of her selling out. She denies it, but viewers know better as they have already heard the edited version of "Big Brother" the record company wanted playing over the airwaves.

Worn out and wanting nothing more than to leave the spotlight, Kate refuses to play a sold-out show. After being forcibly drugged, she takes the stage in a futuristic day-glo outfit that clearly influenced – or, if you prefer, was ripped off by – the producers of *Trom*. She begins singing "Eighth Day," a song about how mankind's love for technology ultimately results in machines becoming self-aware and turning against humanity. (So the argument can be made of how the flick influenced *The Terminator* too). During the course of the movie, Kate often refers to her fear of an Orwellian future. Bathed in lasers and blue light, it appears that her worst nightmares have come true – she has lost all semblance of her humanity.

At this point the US version of the film ends; effective to be sure, but lacking the closure of the original UK cut where Kate retreats from the stage and heads to an underground train in a sequence that echoes the film's "Writing on the Wall" opening. On the verge of madness, she begins having visions of the people she has alienated as well as an array of Kate clones who have perfectly replicated what used to be her look. (Completing the sci-fi influence hat trick, many of these Kates have similar makeup to that worn by Daryl Hannah in *Blade Runner*). In this dreamlike sequence, it's not sure what Kate is seeing and what she is imagining but what is certain is that her mind is collapsing in on itself. In the movie's final scene, Kate is shown recovering in a mental institution. Danny arrives with a portable keyboard, suggesting that maybe their relationship and her career can get back on track.

Much like *Fame* and *Once, Breaking Glass* is a naturalistic musical in which the "inspired by punk" songs are just as much a part of the story as the dialogue. Each of the songs were written and performed by Hazel O'Connor, who delivers a performance that should have made her an international star. Instead, she has been relegated to a steady career as an under-the-radar actress, musician and cult figure – not a bad way to make a living, but one that doesn't allow her numerous talents to reach the masses as they should.

Until recently, this film was incredibly difficult to get a hold of. The UK DVD was issued briefly before going out of print, and if it weren't for frequent airings during the *Night Flight* anthology series in the 1980s, it would probably be completely unknown in the United States. Despite being extremely obscure, its massive impact on contemporary pop culture is evident. Along with the aforementioned sci-fi films that have taken a cue from the movie's dystopian warnings, the style of Lady Gaga is unmistakably Kate-esque. Fortunately, the tide is turning and word is finally getting out. Thanks to the wonders of Netflix streaming and a domestic DVD release from Olive Films, *Breaking Glass* finally seems poised to get the attention it so desperately deserves. If you have a fondness for the post-punk era or just a love for cautionary tales, be sure to check it out and be prepared for an experience that is, as the tagline promises, truly shattering.

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Babe: Pig in the City (1998) is one of the best films ever made. There. I said it. It's in print and thus it must be true. *Babe: Pig in the City* is one of the best films ever made. Hands down. No question. No joke. It really is. It's an idea that can set your mind reeling. Surely, great films are about great people doing great things and with any luck, dying slow, lingering deaths that allow us to bask in their heroism, heartbreak, and humanity. How can a film about a talking pig measure up? Beyond that, how can a *sequel* about a talking pig measure up? Well, you're going to have to trust me on this – it can. It does. In terms of script, directing, acting, sound and editing, it is a brilliant film, a stunning *tour de force* that has no business being as good as it is.

It's a film that was the brainchild of George Miller, who produced, wrote, and directed it. Now, the odds are you've never heard of George Miller. You hear the name and think, isn't he some country singer? He's our insurance agent, right? Didn't he used to do our taxes? He would probably be much better known if he had a splendid director name like Federico Fellini or Akira Kurosawa or Ingmar Bergman. By comparison, the name George Miller has kind of a damp squib feel about it.

Mind you, he didn't start out as George Miller. He started out as George Miliotis, a bouncing baby boy born to Greek immigrant parents in Chinchilla, Australia. And he didn't start out as a screenwriter and director. He quite sensibly became a medical doctor and it was the time he spent in an emergency room reassembling human beings which inspired short films like *Violence in the Cinema: Part I* (1971) and his first feature film, *Mad Max* (1979). More recently, his attention has been focused on lovable penguins in the films *Happy Feet* (2006) and the cleverly titled *Happy Feet 2 in 3D* (2011).

So then, this is a filmmaker who began his career by exploring the joys of red-hot pokers being shoved through eyeballs and innocent women and children being brutally murdered by bikers, before transforming into a director quite happy to make films devoted to the wacky antics of animated flightless aquatic birds. And in between these two filmmaking extremes is *Babe: Pig in the City*. How to best describe this film? It is *Blade Runner* for little kids. It is George Orwell's *Animal Farm* on celluloid. And it is a film which has two characteristics meticulously avoided by

most cinematic fare – it is both clever and wise.

It began life, of course, as a sequel to the beloved film, *Babe* (1995). Based on the novel *The Sheep-Pig* (1983) by Dick King-Smith, *Babe* told the unlikely story of a pig who learned to herd sheep, and this rather simple premise so underwhelmed anyone interested in investing in a movie, Miller spent close to a decade trying to get the film underway. Ultimately made for an estimated \$30 million over a period of more than two years, the film brought in over \$250 million. All of a sudden the idea of a sheep-herding pig seemed quite wonderful. The film won a Golden Globe for Best Comedy, was named Best Film by both the London Critics Circle and the National Society of Film Critics (USA), and it is the last G-rated movie to have been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Film. Beyond that, perhaps no film has inspired more people to give up bacon than *Babe*. Clearly, a sequel was in order and Miller was up to the task. This time, not only did Miller pen the screenplay and produce the film, he also directed it.

And it's here that our tale turns a little sad. *Babe: Pig in the City* had a production budget in the \$80-90 million range, but upon release, the film that didn't even pull in \$70 million. In movie terms (as well as any other terms), that's not a good thing. The critical response was all over the map. Either it was a "brilliant" (*Entertainment Weekly*) "tour de force" (*Variety*) which is "more magical than the original" (*Chicago Sun-Times*) and "George Miller's masterpiece" (*Chicago Reader*), or it was a "desperate, pathetic mess" (*San Francisco Chronicle*) that had "lost its bearings" (*NY Times*) and was "likely to make kids cry" (*Mr. Showbiz*).

Why this extraordinary range of responses from people who all watched the same film? Well, for the most part, the critics who panned the film fell prey to that most insidious of critical pitfalls, judging the film for what they *thought* it should be instead of what it *is*. The original *Babe* was cute and funny and full of cute and cuddly animals doing cute and cuddly things; therefore, the sequel should essentially be the same film. It wasn't. And while some critics were able to judge the sequel on its own merits, others felt that their expectations had been betrayed, so the film must be bad. When challenged, any critic can fall back on the usual comfy rationale that he is entitled to his opinion. This is true. However, most critics are unlikely to face up to the little-known corollary to this "I'm entitled to my opinion" mantra. What is that corollary? Some opinions are bad. Yes, I know that amounts to cultural heresy, and I fully expect a moral relativism SWAT team to knock my door down at any moment, but it's true. Some opinions are goofy. Others are asinine. Plenty of opinions are just flat out stupid. If you doubt this, consider the following:

- The Ford Pinto is the finest car ever made.
- The Detroit Lions have been in the best team in the NFL for the past fifty years.

Both of these opinions are available to anyone, but they're not very good opinions. And so it is with the critics who panned *Babe: Pig in the City*. Yes, they are entitled to a negative opinion, but it's not a very good opinion. As noted, not only is it a good film, it is one of the best films ever made. It may sound wrong to say that about a film starring a talking pig, but here again, the trick is to overcome preconceived notions about what can be good or bad. It's entirely possible that Jerry Lewis could sit down and write a play far superior to anything Shakespeare or Ibsen ever wrote. It's possible that Mike Tyson could compose a symphony every bit as brilliant as anything created by Mozart or Beethoven. But even if Jerry Lewis or

Mike Tyson did such a thing, they would never be recognized for it, because we would be unable to see or judge their works on their own merits. Our preconceived notions limit our ability to see things as they really are to a considerable extent, which is why *Babe: Pig in the City* is unlikely to be ranked up there with *Citizen Kane* and *The Godfather*. But it should be.

What makes *Babe: Pig in the City* so special? Well, in the first place, it has the *cojones* to be nothing like the gentle, amusing, bucolic original. As the film opens, it seems as if it will be. As you may or may not recall, *Babe* concludes with Babe's stunning victory in a sheepdog trial. The sequel picks up where the original left off, and we see Babe and Farmer Hoggett returning home in triumph with an enormous trophy after their great adventure together.

Soon enough trouble in the form of evil bankers comes to the Hoggett homestead, and Babe and Mrs. Hoggett attempt to travel to a distant fair for a much needed appearance fee to prevent the bankers from foreclosing on their farm. However, a missed connecting flight strands the intrepid duo, and they are forced to venture into the big city of Metropolis. It is here that the film takes a turn into the fantastically surreal, as Babe and Mrs. Hoggett venture into an urban landscape that is absolutely unique in the history of film and which might best be described, in Hollywood-ese, as Dali meets Disney.

Babe and Mrs. Hoggett are put up in a home that caters to a rather special clientele; specifically, animals that have been abandoned or otherwise made homeless by capricious and uncaring humans. Cats, dogs, goldfish, light-fingered chimpanzees and a well-dressed orangutan by the name of Thelonus all coexist in a world that would like nothing more than for them to disappear for good. Beyond that, there are three mice who work as a kind of Greek Chorus as events unfold, Mickey Rooney appears as a decrepit and barely coherent clown, and a homicidal bull terrier who is out to kill Babe philosophizes about his brutal nature by explaining, "A murderous shadow lies hard across my soul."

If all that sounds as if it might be a bit much for your average six-year-old, well, it is. In truth, this film is no more for children than Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a good bedtime story for little Johnny. A chase scene featuring a Doberman pinscher and the aforementioned bull terrier hurtling after Babe in murderous pursuit is accompanied by narration by the inimitable Roscoe Lee Browne and the beautiful Humming Chorus from *Madame Butterfly*.

A long-time fan of mythologist Joseph Campbell, George Miller (much like Fellini), claims that all of his films are basically the same movie, whether they involve Apocalyptic survivors in the Outback or tap-dancing penguins. And in both of the *Babe* films, the character of Babe embarks on the classic journey of the hero, much like Odysseus and




Luke Skywalker before him. That's part of the appeal of the films, but perhaps a larger part of the appeal of Miller's films is that they are well-written. As Miller himself has noted, "I don't see myself as a filmmaker, I really don't. I'm led mainly by my curiosity, and the thing I'm the most curious about is the writing, and the telling of the story, which begins with the writing."

Any filmmaker who prioritizes the writing of the script is a rarity to be cherished, because we don't see their like very often. Make no mistake about it, Miller can create stunts and use animatronics and CGI with the best of them, but they are there to serve the story and the characters, not replace them.

And so it was that at the end of 1998 when all the film critics on the planet sat down to vote for the best film of the year, most of them went for the obvious and predictable choices of either *Saving Private Ryan* or *Shakespeare in Love*. One critic, however, did not. Gene Siskel, the reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune*, boldly declared that *Babe: Pig in the City* was the best film of the year. Somehow, he was able to look past the shadow of its predecessor *Babe*, and he was not deterred by the fact that the film starred a talking pig. He was able to see the film for what it was — an elegant, funny, timeless, and beautiful fable. In short, if you can somehow let go of your preconceived notions of what a great film can be, *Babe: Pig in the City* is a film that you will want to watch again immediately after you have seen it. It's that stunning. It's that good. And no, it's not for kids.



VINO VERITAS



Add a little excitement and
adventure to your evening.



Dressed like Maria Von Trapp in *The Sound of Music*, Yasmine Bleeth runs screaming through the mountains, chased by a scrappy-looking character who pins her down and attempts to rape her. A knight on a white horse rides by, he extends his hand to her. CUT TO Bleeth in the back of a car at night with some guy on top of her, screwing away, while she looks blankly out the window at the glare of neon light. This is how *Heaven or Vegas* begins...

From the opening scene, I knew this film might be something different than most of the straight-to-video product being dumped on the market at a time when people still rented movies, Blockbuster was king, and it was kind to rewind.

I came across *Heaven or Vegas* accidentally while picking through VCDs at an Asian super store. Seeing that *Heaven or Vegas* also stars Richard Grieco, I feared that the film might mirror his other poor choices of scripts from the forgettable *Mobsters* to the unwatchable Sean Young biker flick *Rebel Run*. *Heaven or Vegas* could have been another wash in Grieco and Bleeth's filmographies. I was wrong. Very wrong.

There is no easy way to describe Gregory C. Haynes's film. In simplest terms it's an adult fairy tale mixed with a Utah travelogue. It's an unknowing nod to films like *Last House on the Left* but steeped in Mormon values. The film also contains drug use, attempted water sports, child molestation, and attempted (gang) rape.

Bleeth plays Mary Jo, a Lolita-dressed stripper/hooker/drug addict with a penchant for fairy tales. After a John attempts to piss on her during a failed drug/sex transaction, she is rescued by another sex worker, Navy (Richard Grieco), who is ready to escape to Montana. Mary Jo (who confesses her real name is Rachel) and Navy go on a road trip as the battered sex workers attempt to bond. Think *Thelma and Louise*, but with characters who have fucked most of Vegas.

During the bonding, Rachel persuades Navy to make a stop in Logan City, Utah. There the film takes a 180 when Rachel visits her estranged father, who has since remarried in the Temple, and gained a cut and paste Mormon family to boot.

Navy becomes comfortable, but Rachel struggles with her new Norman Rockwell stepsisters. The relationship between Navy and Rachel nearly comes to an end when she's almost gang raped in a pool hall to the Samantha Fox classic "Do Ya Do Ya (Wanna Please Me)" by a bunch of nomadic hillbilly type ravers, known to the locals as "tenters." Shortly after Navy saves her (again), their worlds come crashing around them showing that Utah is far from heaven as events go from bad to worse.

Just like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* can the former sex workers ever find their way over the rainbow to Montana?

THE PRODUCTION

Shot in 1996 but not released until 1999, *Heaven or Vegas* was the third feature directed by Gregory C. Haynes. Once the script was created, there was a buzz about it. Original contenders to play the parts of Rachel and Navy included Juliette Lewis and Matt Dillon. After seeing an episode of *Baywatch*, Haynes submitted the script to Yasmine Bleeth's agent. She agreed to do the film the next day. It would take another year for Richard Grieco to sign onto the project and for financing to fall into place.

With a budget a little over a million dollars, the production was shot in seven-teen days. Cinematographer Stephen Douglas Smith shows the beauty of the Utah setting with the damaged characters playing well with and against it. On questioning Haynes about letting some scenes play out in medium long shots, he confesses it had just as much to do with time constrictions as careful planning. Feeling along the lines of, and giving a nod to, the film works of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, many felt this work would fit along the lines of his contemporaries. "I wanted it to be [a] chick flick... A beautiful fairy tale in a dark experience," he says.

The film had its premiere on the Paramount lot to a packed house. The audience seemed to enjoy the screening but, after the gala, key participants (including Bleeth and Grieco) said it was not the film they hoped for. Only Monica Potter, who played Rachel's step-sister Lilli, stood by the film while others turned their backs.

When questioned what type of theatrical release the film had, Haynes admits there wasn't one. Film festival audiences didn't even get a chance to pass judgment on the film; it wasn't submitted to any. Storm Entertainment, who owned the film, dumped it to home video (via Sony) and pre-sold European countries. Key players of the development of *Heaven or Vegas* didn't want to roll the dice at the crap tables



Nasty Tenter



of a theatrical-going public, stayed safe, and released it to home video with little fanfare.

Director Greg Haynes didn't see his work premiered at Sundance but at a Blockbuster Video in Utah.

LIFE IMITATES ART

Heaven or Vegas deals with the hardship of the two main characters which, at the be-

ginning of the film, shows Rachel's coke abuse. Shortly afterwards, Grieco and Bleeth's life would mirror some of their characters' actions within the film. "I can say it was very painful in the lives of those involved with the film, myself included," says Haynes.

Regardless, *Heaven or Vegas* is the only work that featured the one-time couple with both giving their best cinematic performances. Grieco plays his character down and introspective while Bleeth attempts to be upbeat in the shadow of a character that has severe emotional issues which remain unchallenged.

Perhaps Grieco and Bleeth were hoping for more of a *Pretty Woman* type film instead of a dark, dirty contemporary fairy tale. This would have made *Heaven or Vegas* more of a knock off instead of a beautiful piece that tells the story of lost souls in search of a holy grail. *Heaven or Vegas* is easily one of the top ten sleeper films of the '90s.

MY SEARCH FOR HEAVEN

From the moment I saw *Heaven or Vegas*, I became convinced that the film deserves to have a theatrical screening with an audience. I was set on seeing if, or where, I could locate a 35mm film print to screen this lost classic. "I can answer that for you," says Haynes, "I had a print which was used in making a coffee table." That was until two years ago, when it went into storage. Then Haynes lost the contents of the storage locker, including possibly an un-spoiled film print of *Heaven or Vegas*. My heart broke.

Richard Grieco's comment about the film is simple yet true, "If [the film] was promoted correctly it would have done really well." Let's hope the Nevada odds eventually play in favor of this contemporary classic and *Heaven or Vegas* can hit the jackpot of new viewers it so richly deserves.

Navy to the rescue



Christmas is a holiday supported by centuries of traditions, and to this vast array of traditions the 20th century contributed, among others, the Christmas movie. Certainly countless families flock to the movie theaters on Christmas Day to take in the latest *Fockers*, Jack Black vehicle, or what-have-you; but it is not to this I refer. Indeed, no sooner has the Thanksgiving turkey's triptophanic slumber overtaken us than a month-long Christmas-themed movie free-for-all begins. Perhaps you open the season as my wife and I do with a late-Thanksgiving Day screening of 1966's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. And what Christmas season would be complete with-

out partaking in at least one of the innumerable cinematic interpretations of Charles Dickens's

A Christmas Carol

And let us not forget, of course, *Rudolph*, *Frosty*, and the like. Many tune in to NBC on Christmas Eve to watch *It's a Wonderful*

Life (1946), which still managed to secure over four million viewers in 2010, while others prefer to go out for the evening to catch *It's a Wonderful Life* and the *White Christmas* (1954) Sing-A-Long at the Annual Music Box Christmas Show in Chicago. And yet there are others still who opt for less conventional Christmas movies such as *Die Hard* (1988) or *Gremlins* (1984).

"But what about *Reindeer Games*?" the spirit of John Frankenheimer wails, rattling his Dickensian chains. Indeed, even this highly improbable, Frankenheimer-helmed, Christmas heist movie has become traditional viewing for some. For eight years running, my wife,

two friends of ours and I have gathered on Christmas Eve for a compulsory viewing of 2000's *Reindeer Games*. Frankenheimer described the film in his DVD commentary as an "edgy, hard movie," and truly he got half of that right, for it is indeed a hard movie — hard to sit through anyway. To ease this hardship, we have, since the inception of this tradition in 2003, supplemented our viewing experience with "some goddamn hot chocolate and some pecan-fucking-pie," as demanded by the film's protagonist, Rudy Duncan (Ben Affleck), upon his release from prison in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Yes, like any Christmas film might, this

particular picture

opens on a prison.

Among the inmates housed

there are car thief

Rudy and his

manslaughtering

cellmate Nick

(James Frain), both

mere days from their

coinciding releases. To

make an arduous, plot

hole-ridden story short:

Nick is killed in a prison

riot before their release; Rudy shacks

up with Nick's pen pal Ashley (Charlize

Theron) after assuming Nick's identity

to get laid; and Rudy is forced, as Nick,

to aid a gang of Michigan-based, gun-

running truckers in the robbery of the

Tomahawk Casino at which Nick was

formerly employed as a security guard.

Beyond that, it becomes exceedingly

difficult to discuss the plot of *Reindeer*

Games with any coherency, for it is every

bit the Hitchcockian "wrong man"

scenario, only with twice the twists and

none of the logic. Frankenheimer

speaks to the plot's improbability when

he discusses the "great lengths" to

which he went "to avoid being accused

THE MONSTER in the GELATIN

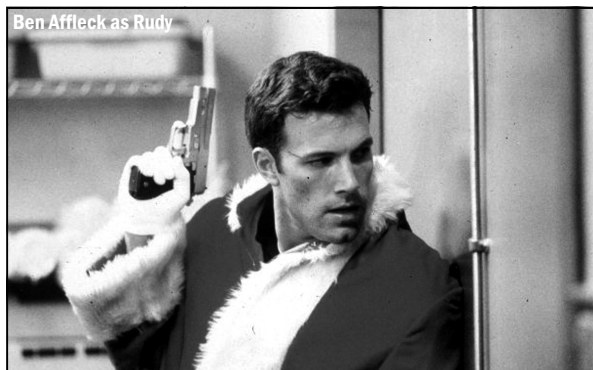
by Jef Burnham



of not being logical.” Certainly Frankenheimer did everything in his power here to assuage the audience’s constant desire for clarification at each turn of the plot, but every answer provided by Frankenheimer raises at least two additional questions. Moreover, screenwriter Ehren Kruger’s twist ending reveals the success of the heist to have been entirely contingent on a series of highly improbable plot conveniences, making it difficult for this viewer at least to believe the whole thing was planned in advance.

So what does this have to do with Christmas? Honestly, virtually nothing,

save for the fact that the Tomahawk Casino heist is carried out on Christmas Eve with Rudy and the truckers disguised in Santa suits. Thus, in approaching the film analytically, the Christmas angle produces scant few results. We glean almost nothing from scrutinizing cellmates Rudy and Nick’s names as references to that most famous reindeer of all and Father Christmas. After all, these connections and those of the film’s diegesis to that of the song “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” by Johnny Marks are indeed little more than hinted at beyond the film’s title – so much so that this con-



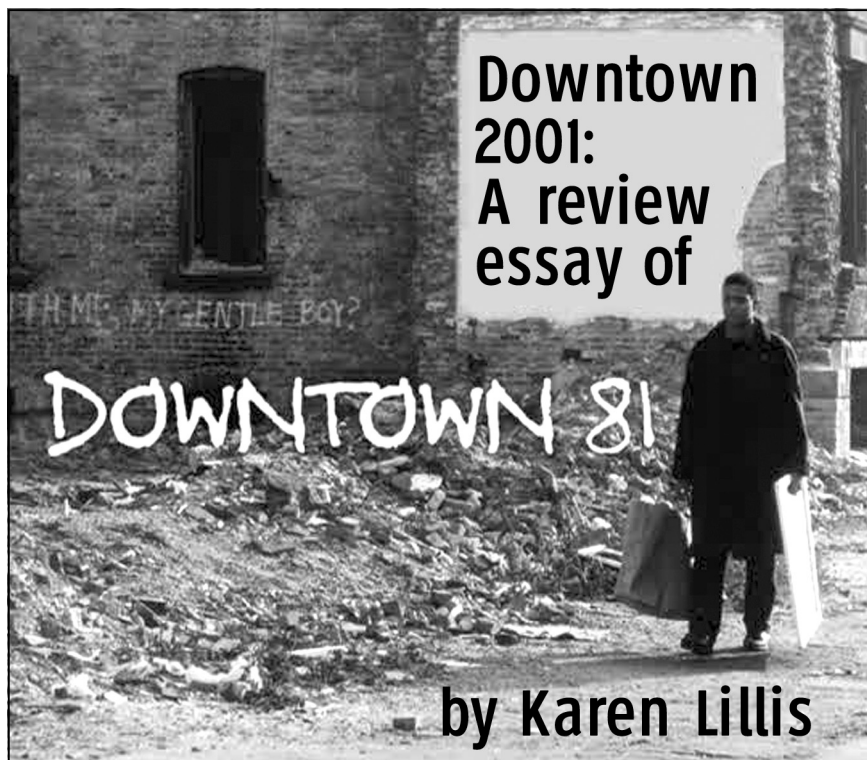
nection appears almost coincidental. The most compelling observation to be made of the film's connection to the Christmas season is that the Santa Clauses herein, as thieves, *take* when Santa would *give*. Whether this is meant to be interpreted as a statement about the commercialism of Christmas or as some sort of critique of the Santa Claus myth, however, is wholly unclear. For me, the key to understanding *Reindeer Games* is found in the only line spoken by Isaac Hayes as Zook, an inmate who sits across from Nick and Rudy in the prison cafeteria. Upon discovering cockroaches in his Jell-O, Zook repeatedly and tellingly screams that "There are monsters in the gelatin!"

I find three major instances in which this seemingly mad statement holds indelible significance in context of the film. It is not only one of the film's primary structural and thematic concerns, but is integral to understanding the film's effect on those of us who have embraced the film ironically. The first application is found in the scene in which the line is uttered. Here, there is little question as to its significance. The cockroaches are literal monsters in literal gelatin. Secondly, when Rudy is forcibly employed by the aforementioned truckers, led by Gabriel, a.k.a. Monster (Gary Sinise), Rudy's post-incarceration coital vacation comes to a

life-threatening conclusion. Gabriel, then, is a literal monster in Rudy's figurative gelatin. And finally, we look to the world outside the film and this tradition eight years running. As another December 25th approaches and we find ourselves entering that "most wonderful time

of the year," the joy of the season is inevitably sullied by the approach of yet another laborious *Reindeer Games* screening. It's enough to put you off of Christmas altogether. The film itself then becomes the figurative monster in our figurative year-end deserts.

Admittedly, since its inception in 2003, we have come to embrace this tradition, but there was a time when we indeed dreaded its approach. To diversify the ordeal, we've screened both the theatrical release and the Director's Cut, we've watched it with commentary, dubbed in French, and even one year with the film's soundtrack replaced entirely by that of *Dirty Dancing*. (It should be noted that we have yet to screen it on Blu-ray, but then, who really needs to see Ben Affleck's ass in full HD anyway?) Barring the release of a Rifftrax to accompany the film, however, it seems that, from this point forward, we'll continue to watch the film as John Frankenheimer intended, for our preferred version is indeed the 2001 Director's Cut. Although this cut boasts an additional twenty minutes over the theatrical release (and more prominently features Ben Affleck's flexing ass cheeks), it also gleefully showcases greater amounts of violence perpetrated against the cast of characters throughout. This at least makes for a far more palatable monster.



July 2001: Dafne called me up and told me there was a new movie I was going to die for. This wasn't a line we said lightly – Dafne and I had just spent the better part of two years dancing and lip-synching in front of a movie screen on Second Avenue, in a cinema that was once a Yiddish playhouse back when the East Village was full of them. Dafne pranced in her best Tim Curry drag while I was *well-secluded* in a curly red wig, maid's uniform, and six-inch heels. "What's the movie?" I asked her excitedly. "It's a story for all the dreamers, it's everything we came to New York for. When can you go?" Soon we headed to the funky, 99-seat Two Boots Pioneer Theater on Avenue A, where *Downtown 81* was exclusively engaged. .

I must have glanced at one of the lackluster reviews before I went to the theater, because I knew going into it that a young Jean Michel Basquiat was the star of *Downtown 81*. I was just as excited to see this movie as I had been to see *Basquiat* when it came out in 1996. I was in art school in New York then, and couldn't wait to watch a big screen view of the brilliant painter, set in the wild downtown landscape of 1980s New York. But *Basquiat* was a bomb for me. I didn't know anything about the New York '80s first hand, but I was sure that the movie got it all wrong. The artist's trajectory I wanted to see just wasn't there – this *Basquiat* was bloated with egos and art stars and no one who seemed human or likeable. Underscoring this point was a phone call from a friend of mine who'd just finished art school: He told me after *he* saw the movie, "If I'm not an Art Star in a year, I've decided I'm going to give it up." This was the cold sentiment that Schnabel's *Basquiat* seemed to bring out: Make it big or you're nothing.

Thankfully, *Downtown 81* was everything that I had wanted *Basquiat* to be. Instead of scenes fetishizing The Serious Artist in his studio working the canvas (cringe factor), *Downtown 81* was a fable of The Artist which followed his hopes and dreams, hassles and despairs. In contrast to the megabucks SoHo oil-paint artist he would become in *Basquiat*, in *Downtown 81*, Basquiat plays himself as a musician and “poet of the streets” as often as he plays a painter. In this movie (as in his 1981 life), Basquiat, a.k.a. SAMO (SAY-mo, for “same old, same old”), is still throwing cryptic word-plays in spray paint onto the crumbling architecture of Lower East Side buildings, making biting and playful critiques of society in an ephemeral medium. The movie carries Basquiat’s *joie de vivre*, an infectious idealism that made Dafne want to share it with me, and then made me want to share it with more friends: I went to see the movie five more times in the theater after my first viewing.

The reviews complained of *Downtown 81*’s thin plot but said it was worth overlooking this defect to see the brilliant music performances. And in one sense, they were right – the performances by the No Wave bands were full of electric energy and hit their mark dead-on. But I insisted on defending the plot, because it succeeded in accomplishing something so cool: It took the material the filmmakers had at hand – not just their friends willing to play-act for free, but a whole scene they were excited by – and created a heightened world, making beautifully-odd celluloid creatures out of 1980s art punks playing themselves.

I couldn’t help but compare the plot structure to The Wizard of Oz or Alice’s Adventures Underground, where the main character moves forward in a sort of dazed, wide-eyed nonchalance while oddities, unusual creatures, and larger-than-life monsters rise from the side of the road. The movie begins with Basquiat’s character getting released from a long hospital stay in uptown Manhattan. His journey is downtown-ward – the New York sidewalks are his Diamond Brick Road and the downtown scene is his underground. Starting out on foot (as many journey stories do), he soon meets a gorgeous and successful European model who offers to drive him in a vintage convertible another forty or so blocks (since the best journey stories in film are road movies). The model drops him off near his apartment, but she’s already made him a fairy tale offer to let him end his artist’s struggle forever: “Won’t you let me take care of you for the rest of your life?” In the ensuing 73-minutes before they meet again, Basquiat runs into scary monsters appearing in the form of his crazy Russian landlord (who wants the overdue rent) and a mysterious thief of band equipment; good fairies in the form of Tish and Snooki (of Manic Panic fame), a rich and seductive Italian woman who buys a painting, a fashion designer friend who listens sympathetically to Jean’s woes, wish-granter Debbie Harry; and strange creatures in the form of the highly-stylized, costumed, and dynamic No Wave bands that emerge from every corner of the movie: Kid Creole and the Coconuts, James White and the Blacks, the Walter Steding Band, the Plastics, DNA, and more.

Dafne was a friend I’d met through one of my photo-school pals, Francesca; they waitressed together at an old Italian café where they served cappuccinos and pastries to Patti Smith, Mafiosos, tourists, and other Greenwich Village regulars. Dafne was from Rome and Francesca was half Italian, half Israeli and had grown up outside Zurich; I came from Virginia, and we’d all bonded as transplants who had bee-lined to New York to try to make it as artists. Dafne and Francesca had

each studied acting; Dafne was now working on tile mosaics and Francesca was concentrating on installation art but still did some photography and writing. I was a photographer-turned-novelist. The three of us were often together dreaming of artistic fame, myth-making about New York, or lamenting city struggles: our constant search for the next job, the next roommate, the next lover, our big break.

The myth of New York in the '70s and '80s (punk rock, performance art, loft-squatting, chaos, cheap rent, and anything-goes Bohemia) was so much of why we had come to the city. And the mantra that *New York was wildest just before we got here* was a constant. For some reason, it was a myth we were invested in upholding, like always having some out-of-reach greatness to pursue. But *Downtown 81* offered more of a glimpse of those wild years, with more specifics to fuel our imagination than I'd ever seen before all in one place – from images of the bombed-out Lower East Side, to Basquiat's easy-going bohemian vibe, to a day-in-the-life filming of the louche downtown art scene, to the sound and look of these amazing bands. The movie itself had a great production story, which only added to its impact on us: The reels had been lost for almost 20 years and then found in Europe. So, after being shot in New York in December 1980 and January 1981, the movie (whose original title was *New York Beat*) didn't see a screen until the 2000 Cannes Festival, followed by a New York release in 2001. Some of the sound reels had been lost forever, and Basquiat's lines had to be re-dubbed by Saul Williams, spoken word dynamo and star of indie flick *Slam* (1998).

Downtown 81 re-energized us, because *Downtown 81* understood us. The movie agreed with our experience that the most powerful people made life hard for artists, the most beautiful people were the artists, and the happy ending was a fairytale worth waiting for. We were working hard at our day jobs, we were making art in obscurity, but we couldn't see how to do it any other way. Unless, of course, someone wanted to offer us that dream contract tomorrow.

Downtown 81 poked fun at all of this. One of our favorite sequences was the one where Walter Steding (playing Walter Steding) outlines what it's like to chase success: "...and you keep practicing and practicing....and a *few* smart people notice... and make you an offer....not a *great* offer, but an offer....." As Steding drones on in an exhausted voice with thick Pennsylvania drawl, the visual scene is that of a crooked, cigar-smoking, record-industry hack offering him a "standahd contract," or of Steding dragging his heavy music equipment to the curb only to have the cab he's just hailed drive away as he turns his back. We knew the feeling.

Living as an artist in New York meant always having the proverbial carrot in our vision, beckoning us to endure or ignore any number of pitfalls to get there: the media, the venues, and fame itself were always there at arm's length. The big break was always around the next corner, and those who'd already been visited by fame were only one or two degrees of separation away – the lives of the famous were entwined with the lives of the hungry and ambitious. Francesca had a crush on the flirtatious John Lurie, who often bought cigarettes at the same bodega where she bought hers and was a sometimes customer at the café. Dafne was pursuing the only straight actor who played Hedwig in the Jane Street Theater production, and for a brief time I carried a torch for Arto Lindsay. I didn't know he was a musician until I saw him in *Downtown 81*; he was a bright-eyed customer in the bookstore I'd been working in for some years before his performance in the DNA sequences in the movie practically threw me out of my seat. His animalistic singing voice shot

down my spine every time I heard it and was much of the reason for my repeat viewings of the movie (although I finally audio-taped the DNA scenes with a mini-cassette recorder so I could replay them obsessively at home). Another regular customer at the bookstore around this time was Tony Shafrazi, one of Basquiat's art dealers in SoHo. He was a real pain in the ass, always stacking a huge pile of books at the back desk, but then around quarter to midnight asking to leave them there so he could call the store owners the next day and try to haggle them into a "volume discount." Always the *enfant terrible*, before he'd been a famous art dealer his claim-to-fame was getting caught for grafitti-ing Picasso's *Guernica* at the MoMA.

By the time I saw *Downtown 81* with my friend Noel it was also playing at the Screening Room, farther downtown in Tribeca. The Screening Room (bought by Robert DeNiro in 2003 and renamed Tribeca Cinemas) was a theater that really made you feel like you were someplace else: It was polished grey like a new print of *Metropolis*, and there was something stark and moneyed, futuristic and elegant about it. Noel was a theater director, video artist, and film enthusiast from Los Angeles. We shared a love of Kathy Acker, *Rocky Horror*, and campy '80s music videos. He'd introduced me to the cinema of Jacques Tournier and the plays of Richard Foreman, the costumes of Bertolt Brecht and the theater antics of the Wooster Group; he'd coached me on my performance style for recent readings of my self-published novel. Not only was I excited to be inducting Noel into the cult of *Downtown 81* fans, but we also got to see scriptwriter Glenn O'Brien and producer Maripol introduce it. O'Brien had been a player on the scene for a while before *Downtown 81* was filmed: notably as a rock critic for *Interview Magazine*, and as the host and creator of the punk-chaotic talk show *TV Party*, which aired (live) from 1978-1982, in the heyday of Manhattan Cable public access, the DIY of television. Many of *Downtown 81*'s stars and bands had been guests on *TV Party* – including a very young Basquiat, as well as Debbie Harry, Tuxedo Moon, Fab Five Freddy, David McDermott, James Chance, and Walter Steding. (You can check out more via the docu-

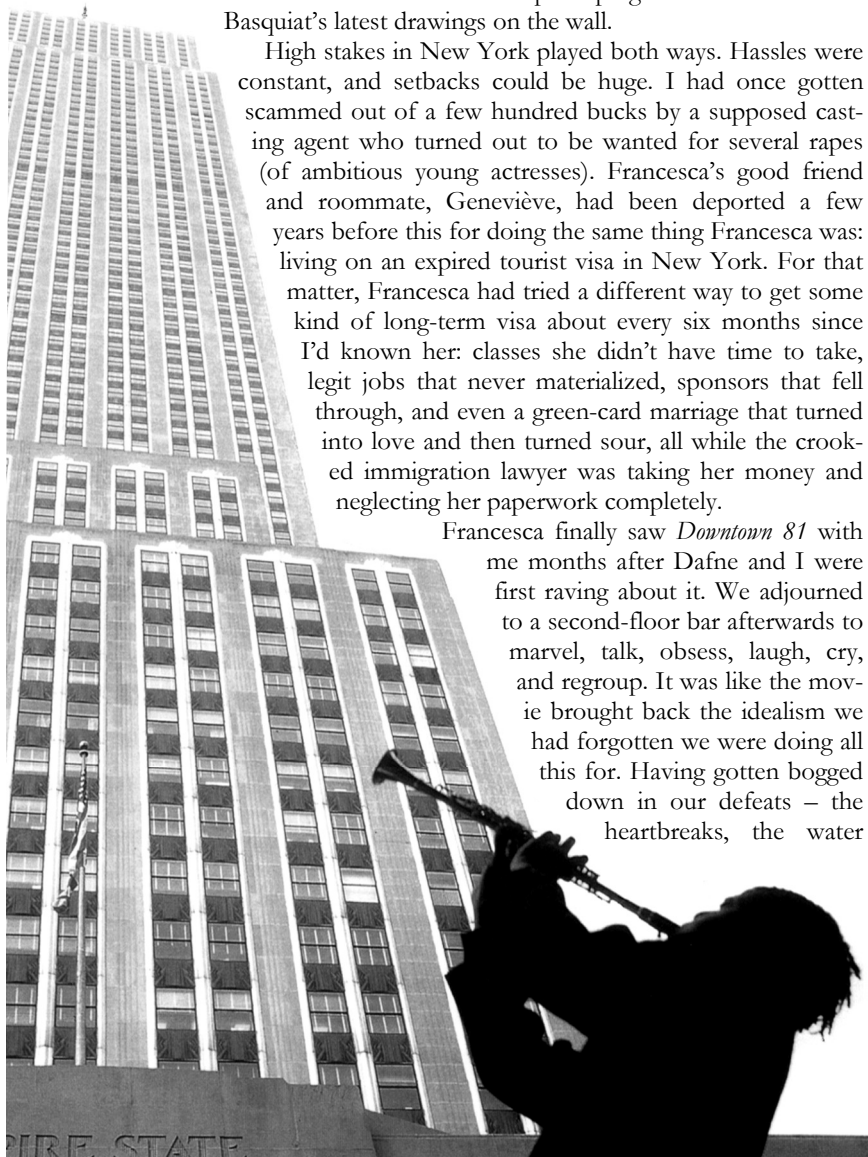


mentary *TV Party* from 2005.) Producer Maripol had been in the fashion world, most famously as stylist to Madonna and Blondie.

New York Beat was filmed a little more than a year before Basquiat began to break big in the gallery scene. In 1980, he was still living from hand to mouth and from bed to bed; so that the filmmakers could keep track of him, they let him sleep in the production offices on Great Jones Street for the duration of the shoot. His lover at the time was Eszter Balint, a 14-year-old Mudd Club scenester who appears briefly in the catwalk scene in *Downtown 81* and would later star in *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984). Basquiat was 19-turning-20 on the movie set; the film crew would often wake the two up sleeping on a mattress under Basquiat's latest drawings on the wall.

High stakes in New York played both ways. Hassles were constant, and setbacks could be huge. I had once gotten scammed out of a few hundred bucks by a supposed casting agent who turned out to be wanted for several rapes (of ambitious young actresses). Francesca's good friend and roommate, Geneviève, had been deported a few years before this for doing the same thing Francesca was: living on an expired tourist visa in New York. For that matter, Francesca had tried a different way to get some kind of long-term visa about every six months since I'd known her: classes she didn't have time to take, legit jobs that never materialized, sponsors that fell through, and even a green-card marriage that turned into love and then turned sour, all while the crooked immigration lawyer was taking her money and neglecting her paperwork completely.

Francesca finally saw *Downtown 81* with me months after Dafne and I were first raving about it. We adjourned to a second-floor bar afterwards to marvel, talk, obsess, laugh, cry, and regroup. It was like the movie brought back the idealism we had forgotten we were doing all this for. Having gotten bogged down in our defeats – the heartbreaks, the water



main breaks, the muggings, the landlords, the hours lost to our jobs and the dollars lost to our security deposits – we’d forgotten what it felt like to be high on the hopes that’d brought us to the big city years before.

That was the fifth time I saw *Downtown 81*. Francesca and I parted late at night with a tight embrace near the Astor Place 6 station, full of warmth and smiles and declarations to make good on our promises to ourselves, each other, and our art-work. It was September 10, 2001. The next day (my usual day off from the bookstore) was spent in a stupor of disbelief watching a different downtown scene on a fuzzy, street-salvaged television my temporary Israeli and Spanish roommates had picked up; frantically trying to get through tied-up phone lines to Dafne, Francesca, Noel, and my family; and walking around north Brooklyn trying to give blood that wasn’t needed.

The last time I saw *Downtown 81* in the theater (late September 2001), it was the first time I’d seen the Twin Towers in a film since, and I gasped like unexpectedly seeing the face of a deceased friend in the background of a crowded photograph. They appear approximately twice in the movie, once when Arto Lindsay is speeding east across the Manhattan Bridge on the back of someone’s motorcycle, and again at the end of the film as Basquiat is driving up West Street in his El Dorado. I rang up Arto at the bookstore register around that same date, in the window of time when strangers in New York were being unusually open-hearted and vocal, and we asked each other, “Where were you?” and “Are you okay?”

It’s possible that my New York art dreams never quite reached the same heights of optimism again.

THE ART OF STEPHEN BLICKENSTAFF





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DEATH ON THE HIGHWAY KILLER CARS

by mike white

There's a killer on the road, and it wants the highway to run red with blood. It could be that semi creeping up behind you, or maybe it's that black Cadillac over to the left. The hairs on the back of your neck stand on end and your palms slick the steering wheel with sweat. You look hard in your rear- and side-view mirrors, but you can't see the faces of the people driving those menacing vehicles. Could they be operating on their own? Don't those headlights and grill look like an evil, glaring face?

Welcome to the world of Killer Cars, a horror film subgenre. Epitomized by Stephen King's *Christine*, these angry autos come from a sublevel in Hell's parking lot to terrorize mortals with menacing motor-revving and rampant vehicular homicide. These are the polar opposites of *Herbie*, *The Love Bug* (or German equivalent Dudu of the *Käfer* series). There's nothing cute about a 1958 Plymouth Fury fueled by high-octane bloodlust barreling down on you.

Killer Cars appear to be motivated by demonic powers or intergalactic phenomenon. *The Car*, *Christine*, and *The Hearse* could use a good exorcist at their next tune-up while *Killdozer*, the motorbike in *Murderlyck*,

and the machines of *Maximum Overdrive* are brought to life courtesy of meteorites or comets.

Duel (Steven Spielberg, 1972, USA)

Before the term road rage existed, writer Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend*) penned the short story "Duel," the tale of a man tormented by a menacing diesel-powered demon. In the Steven Spielberg-directed TV movie, Dennis Weaver stars as David Mann, an everyman making his way down a California freeway only to randomly cross the path of a semi-truck whose unseen driver seems to take great pleasure in messing with him. He drives too slowly in a no-passing zone before flagging Mann to go around him, inviting Mann into oncoming traffic. From there, all bets are off.

License plates decorate the truck.

These trophies have been taken from cars the truck encountered in the past. If the driver has his way, Mann's plate will join the collection. The truck goes from toying with Mann to terrorizing him at every hairpin turn. Matheson, who adapted his story for the screen, cleverly paces the action such that this relatively simple tale becomes a tense



tales of survival.

Like films such as *Death Car on the Freeway* or arguably *Black Cadillac*, *Duel* straddles the white line between the Killer Car and Road Terror subgenres. There's no doubt that a man is driving the truck, but it seems it's the machine whose bloodlust must be sated.

Killdozer (Jerry London, 1974, USA)

On an island off the coast of Africa, a six-man work crew uncovers a meteorite. When one of the workers, Mack (Robert Urich), tries to move it, he's burned to a crisp and his bulldozer becomes infused with an eerie blue glow possessing the machine, turning it into Killdozer! Clint Walker stars as Lloyd Kelly, the square-jawed site boss. He and his crew strive to outwit Killdozer. The crafty heavy machinery destroys their radio, levels their barracks, and stays one step ahead as it picks them off (somehow never running out of fuel).

Adapted for the small screen by sci-fi scribe Theodore Sturgeon, the story bears uncanny similarities with *The Thing from another World*. Both take place in an isolated locale where a handful of men fight a creature from outer space. Even the manner of defeating the creature is similar.

The Car (Elliot Silverstein, 1977, USA)



When Satan goes joyriding, there's no better vehicle to do it in than a tricked-out '71 Lincoln Continental Mark III. Though, he might have chosen someplace a little more populous than Santa Ynez, Utah.

Such a sleepy town has more than its share of law enforcement. That's a good thing because they're about to lose half the staff when the myste-

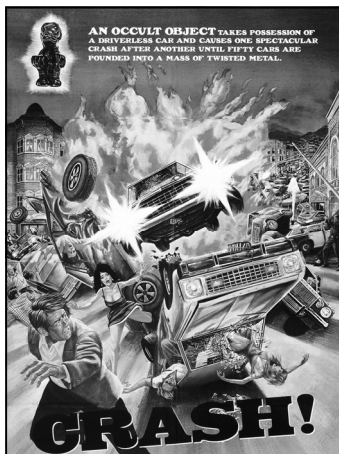
rious grey Lincoln comes out of the distant desert to wreak havoc on bicyclists, hitchhikers, cowboys, and anyone else who gets in its way. James Brolin plays lawman Wade Parent. He's not one for cars, opting instead for a zippy motorbike.

Written by Michael Butler and Dennis Shryack, *The Car* feels like a made-for-TV movie with a theatrical budget. Think of Elliot Silverstein's *The Car* as Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* by way of *Duel*.

Crash! (Charles Band, 1977, USA)

Disabled in an automobile accident years before, Marc Denne (Jose Ferrer)

is a bitter man. That his young wife, Kim (Sue Lyons), walked away from the crash unscathed makes him even angrier. He arranges to have his Doberman pinscher attack Kim in her car, causing her to crash anew. Alas, she's not dead. Worse, an opportune purchase at a flea market has provided Kim with an evil



idol to Akaza, Hittite god of vengeance. When she's in the idol's power her eyes turn red, and she has telekinetic power over anything with wheels, including her bitchin' Camaro.

When Kim awakens in the hospital, she's one of the many movie casualties of amnesia. Luckily, she's got handsome doctor Gregg Martin (John Ericson) to look after her. He and police Lieutenant Pegler (Jerome Guardino) are determined to uncover her identity, the only clue to which is the idol she holds. Martin turns to an expert in Hittite artifacts, none other than — you guessed it — Kim's sinister rubber hubby!

In what amounts to another film entirely encapsulated in Charles Band's *Crash*, the Camaro tears ass around the countryside, admirably killing hippies, landlords, and annoying tourists. Any car unlucky enough to get in its path not only flips or flies over, it inevitably explodes into a fireball. It's as if Akaza learned how to drive from watching *Smokey and the Bandit*.

The convertible growls as it zooms along Route 61. Never needing to refuel, it simply runs on high-octane Hittite hatred!

The Hearse (George Bowers, 1980, USA)

Jane Hardy (Trish Van Devere) leaves her friend, Ms. Exposition, and psychiatrist, Dr. Cynical, behind in San Francisco for the quiet little town of Blackford (get it?). Things start off poorly in the new burg when she gets into a fender bender with a mysterious hearse that pulls away before insurance infor-

mation can be exchanged. The residents of Blackford treat her with various levels of suspicion and outright hostility, especially the caretaker of her late aunt's house, Mr. Pritchard (Joseph Cotten). He's so cantankerous, you figure that he'll be under the rubber mask of some strange creature by the end of the film saying, "And I would have gotten it away with it too, if it hadn't been for you meddling kids."

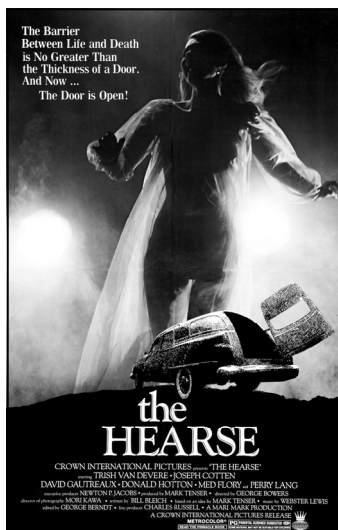
The freshman screenwriting effort from television scribe William Bleich, *The Hearse* idles but never quite gets into gear. Though the hearse seems to

be under its own power, eventually its drivers (Dominic Barto and David Gautreaux) are shown. There's about fifteen minutes worth of plot to be had in this ninety-five-minute outing. The whole affair boils down to a tale of Satanism and restless spirits, ending in a fiery anticlimax.

Black Volkswagen (Jeremias Moreira Filho, 1982, Brazil)

The titular vehicle in *Black Volkswagen* may be menacing, but it's a lover, not a killer. Like any heterosexual male, the Hate Bug is attracted to Diana (future kiddie-show host Xuxa Meneghel). It crashes her engagement party, literally, before stealing her away for a joy ride. Can her bulky fiancée protect her? Will the soulful horse whisperer save her? Will the bumbling comic relief do anything that isn't accompanied by a cacophony of sound effects? Don't count on it!

The movie meanders through endless talky scenes that feel like they're



out of a low-grade soap opera, keeping the star of the show, the black Volkswagen, out of the forefront.

Christine (John Carpenter, 1983, USA)

The grande dame of the Killer Car subgenre, *Christine* was directed by John Carpenter with a screenplay by Bill Phillips. Based on the Stephen King novel of the same name, King's fiction was so hot at the time that the film rights were optioned even before the book was published.

A story of Autumn Red teenage obsession, *Christine* epitomizes the Killer Car subgenre. Keith Gordon gives a stellar performance as Arnie Cunningham, a geek who finds true love. Trapped in the twisted chrome and rusted steel a caring – albeit evil – heart still beats in the evil Plymouth Fury, Christine. Blood and machines don't mix in Stephen King's world. An accident on a Detroit assembly line jump starts Christine's blood lust. With Arnie's help and some supernatural aid, she's restored to her former glory. The line between where Arnie begins and Christine ends soon becomes blurred. She sings her devotion to him via the clever use of '50s music on her radio, showing her love by taking revenge on everyone who wronged him, including Buddy Repperton (William Os- trander) and his cronies.

Beautifully shot by Donald M. Morgan, *Christine* remains one of John Carpenter's best works, and the ultimate Killer Car film.

Nightmares (Joseph Sargent, 1983, USA)

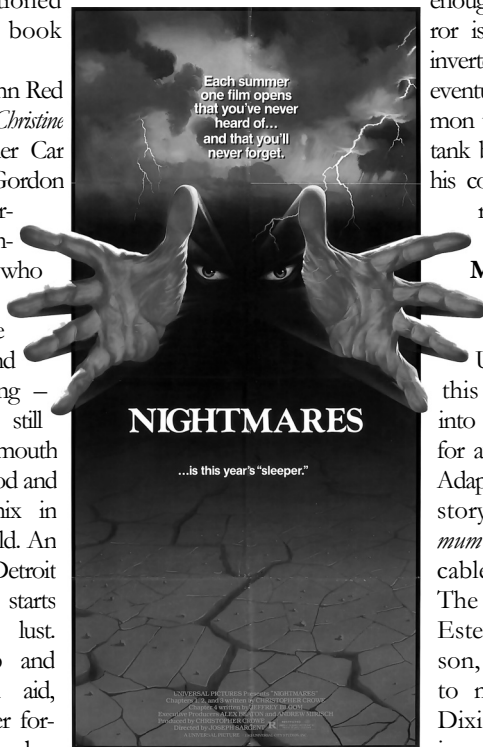
Anthology films seldom, if ever, work and *Nightmares* is no exception. It's an uneven compendium of horror tales. "Benediction" is the story of a priest, MacLeod (Lance Henriksen), who's lost his faith. When he tries to leave his parish, he's terrorized by a black Chevy truck. The vehicle comes from Hell. In one scene, it burrows out of the ground before shooting into the air for an attack. If that wasn't enough, the rearview mirror is decorated with an inverted crucifix! MacLeod eventually defeats the demon truck with a propane tank before going back to his congregation, his faith renewed.

Maximum Overdrive (Stephen King, 1986, USA)

Unrepentantly cheesy, this is the lone venture into the director's chair for author Stephen King. Adapted from King's story "Trucks," *Maximum Overdrive* was a cable staple of the '80s. The film stars Emilio Estevez as Bill Robinson, an ex-con trying to make good at the Dixie Boy Truck Stop in North Carolina.

He's having a tough day at work. His boss, Bubba Hendershot (Pat Hingle), wants him to work nine hours but only stay on the clock for eight. Somewhat worse, the Earth has gotten into the tail of rogue comet Rhea-M, causing machines to take on a life of their own, attacking anything with a pulse.

Inspired by Richard Matheson and Theodore Sturgeon, King's story is a classic cross-section of characters



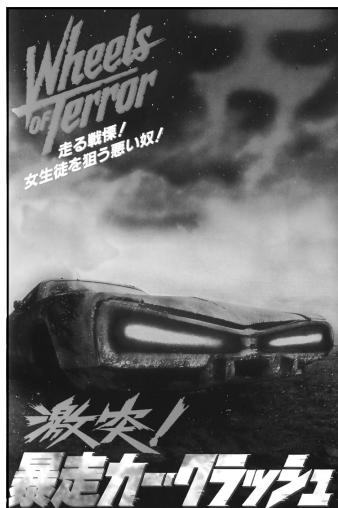
trapped in a location piece. A group of bloodthirsty tractor trailers trap Dixie Boy patrons inside. Recalling the gas station scene of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, we watch as the trucks pick off patrons one and two at a time, all set to the strains of AC/DC. King pulls out all the stops (with a story that defies its own internal logic) as if to show up the directors who had sullied his stories.

Maximum Overdrive sports a handful of memorable bits, but stalls too often.

Wheels of Terror (Christopher Cain, 1990, USA)

The new MILF in town, Laura (Joanna Cassidy), gets a job driving a school bus for the handful of kids in Copper Valley including her daughter Stephanie (Marcie Leeds). She soon learns that a dirty '74 Dodge Charger stalks the town's daughters. They disappear into the passenger's seat, reappearing days later much the worse for wear. Even when Laura witnesses a kidnapping, Copper Valley's authorities just don't buy it.

Shown under the name *Terror in Copper Valley* when it aired on the USA Network in 1990, somewhere in Christopher Cain's made-for-TV film hides a subtext about child molestation but it's obscured by the abuse of slow motion, coupled with an inadequate script by Alan B.



McElroy (the creative powerhouse behind *Ballistic: Ecks vs. Sever*).

Perhaps only notable for its absurd ending – the Charger falls into a quarry (a common death for Killer Cars) and lands on a shed full of explosives – this movie should never be viewed again by human eyes.

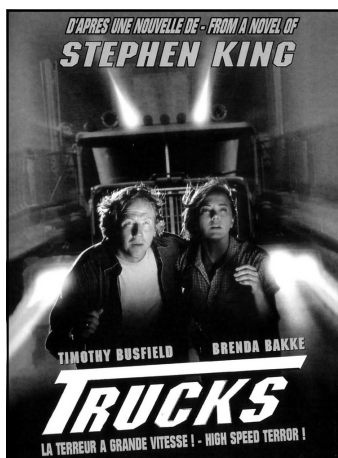
Trucks (Chris Thomson, 1997, USA)

It's the rare film that makes one long for the intellectual depths

of *Mansquito*, *Raging Sharks*, or other Sci-Fi Channel dreck. This co-production between Lion's Gate Films and the USA Network may lead to physical pain and mental anguish. If these conditions persist, please contact your doctor and/or cease watching *Trucks* immediately.

Loosely based on the same Stephen King story that gave the world *Maximum Overdrive*, the films' plots are similar but *Trucks* has none of the mirth and all the stupidity of the earlier film. This made-for-TV movie stars limp noodle Timothy Busfield as Ray, owner of a truck stop that he runs with his father's

pal, George (Victor Cowie), and son, Logan (Brendan Fletcher). They're refugees from Detroit, having left after Ray's wife died. That means that Ray is a damaged man, who will have to find a new love before the movie's over. Dollars to donuts that gal's going to be Hope (Brenda Bakke), a local tour guide.



Like *Maximum Overdrive*, Chris Thomson's flaccid effort suffers from logic gaps wider than the Grand Canyon. Initially, it appears that only diesel-powered trucks are affected by the space dust or toxic chemicals (take your pick). Soon even toy trucks are also self-aware. But the most ridiculous scene has to be a hazmat suit filling up with air and attacking two guys with an axe. You'll either laugh hysterically or cry for mercy. I cried.

I Bought a Vampire Motorcycle (Dirk Campbell, 1990, UK)

An intentionally campy horror comedy, *I Bought a Vampire Motorcycle* begins with a Satanic priest losing his life to a biker gang. He gets the last laugh by transferring his blighted spirit into one of their rides. Little does Noddy (Neil Morrissey) know when he buys the two-wheeled terror that his life will get turned upside down as his new means of transportation tries to kill everyone around him. Fortunately he finds a sympathetic priest (Anthony Daniels) and garlic-chomping policeman, Inspector Cleaver (Michael Elphick), who help Noddie cast the malignant motorbike's spirit into hell where it belongs. You may wonder how the bike extracts blood from its victims: when the headlamp suddenly turns red, its front wheel forks sport long metal tubes that



act as its teeth. That's par for the course on the rampant silliness of Dirk Campbell's cursed chopper flick.

Murdercycle (Tom Callaway, 1999, USA)

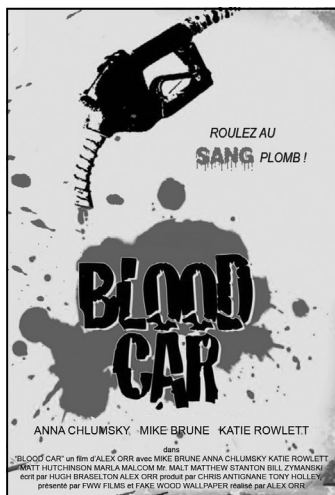
A meteor crashes outside of a government post just as an unfortunate motocross enthusiast happens to be passing by in the dead of night.

The space rock sends out tendrils that trap the rider and transform him and his bike into a black plastic-clad monster that rides around and growls. The audience occasionally sees a point-of-view shot with the rider's infrared vision. It's like *Predator* on a joy ride and it must be stopped!

A group of marines, along with their prerequisite sneaky CIA operative (Michael Vachetti), wussy doctor (Robert Staccardo), and psychic helper (Cassandra Ellis), travel to an abandoned farm to talk, walk around, and take occasional potshots at the demonic dirt biker. Replacing Natasha Henstridge with a motorbike, *Murdercycle* is highly reminiscent of *Species* – especially with its lame-ass psychic character who can read minds, hear thoughts, and pick up memories from objects, but still has to ask, “Are you worried?”

Blood Car (Alex Orr, 2007, USA)

The vehicle in *Blood Car* recalls Audrey 2



more than Christine. Like the plant that feeds on blood in *Little Shop of Horrors*, the titular vehicle in Alex Orr's film needs the same thing for fuel. In a world where gasoline costs \$32.21 a gallon, Archie Andrews (Mike Brune) tries to make an engine that runs on wheat grass. It works about as well as wheat grass tastes. When he accidentally learns that blood makes his turbine spin – and that the slutty girl at the meat stand puts out for guys with wheels – he retrofits his ride. To keep his motor running, Archie has to sacrifice a few folks to his exsanguinating sedan.

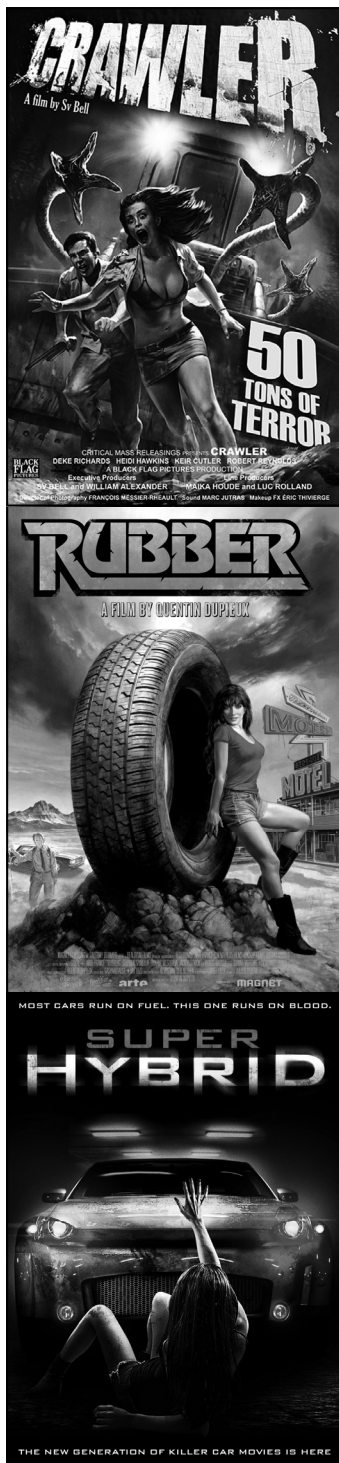
Like its 1982 predecessor, Juraj Hertz's *Ferat Vampire*, *Blood Car* may not fit neatly into the Killer Car subgenre. Neither of these vehicles are driven by a faceless antagonist nor are they possessed by an evil spirit. Nevertheless, the body counts add up thanks to some blood-thirsty cars.

Killer Cars still have a lot of mileage left on them. Three variations on the theme came to the screen in 2009-2011. In Sv Bell's *Crawler* (2009), another land mover plagues innocents with 50 tons of terror. This time, the possessed machine reaches out and turns its victims into its pawns with some handy tentacles.

It'd be an interesting experiment to see what would happen if any of the aforementioned evil cars were outfitted with the star of Quentin Dupieux's *Rubber* (2010), the tale of Robert, a self-aware tire. A fun, albeit pretentious, experiment in movie expectations, *Rubber* doesn't necessarily explain how Robert came to be, but the film demonstrates that it's best to not mess with him.

In 2011 Eric Valette's *Super Hybrid* found its way to home video. The film tells the story of a female mechanic (Shannon Beckner) trapped in a Chicago police garage with a murderous car (shades of James Seale's *Throttle* or Franck Khalfoun's *P2*). The twist? The car is actually a shape-shifting alien.

The Killer Car just keeps rolling on...



LOVE NOT GIVEN LIGHTLY

THE CINEMA OF DOMINATION
AND THE DOMINATION OF CINEMA

BY MIKE WHITE

The whip cracks! A man moans. Is it pleasure or pain he's experiencing? Is there a difference? To any sub worth his weight in salty tears – no, not much, as long as it's safe, sane, and consensual. The art of dominance and submission (the erotic element of D/s in BDSM – Bondage/Discipline/SadoMasochism), is in its purest sense, absent from the silver screen. Superficially explored more and more, power exchange is a taboo topic that is freely and frequently mocked, misunderstood and derided in film, though mention of the scene keeps emerging each decade in both mainstream and underground cinema. What is the fascination and fear of love not given lightly?

Emma Peel paved the way for mainstream proto-dommes on the '60s TV show *The Avengers*, fueling fantasies around the globe. Her comely frame and form-fitting leather bodysuit left just enough to the imagination. She was all about femme power creating tension through tease; a campy, action heroine pinup in fetish garb, resonating long and loud. That persona celebrated redux in force with ever-so-clever, dynamic smiling domme gals getting some action in the *Charlie's Angels* action comedies with Drew Barrymore, Cameron

Diaz and Lucy Liu; and again morphed into scenes of gothic attire with *Aeon Flux*, *Elektra*, *The Matrix*, *Razor Blade Smile* and *Underworld*.

The garb with the most influence to American audiences in recent cinematic history belongs to Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman in *Batman Returns*; that PVC cat suit has decorated the covers of myriad fetish magazines. With whip in hand and a liberated libido, Catwoman could've been a force with which to reckon. Unfortunately, she was declawed by her psychosis and rampant need for a man (in a bat suit no less). Like so many other apparent dommes of the silver screen, she walked the walk and talked the talk but didn't live the life. She was still just a fantasy fixture in a male-defined world.

One wouldn't have to be trussed up in Wonder Woman's lasso of truth to confess that allegedly dominant women in cinema are too often anything but; instead they're like little girls clip-clopping around in their mother's high heels, faces slathered in make-up, putting on airs and taking femininity to an absurd end.

Adolescent pimple-faced comedies have been home to a host of frighteningly powerful gals in recent years (*American Wedding*, *EuroTrip*, *Tomcats*), but these appearances are punch-lines with the dominatrix personifying an über-femme, a device meant to scare the bejeezus out of boys and insecure men. These male characters can't even deal with regular females, and run from the dressed-up clown versions of dominas, penises tucked between their legs! Comedic to the point of demeaning, power exchange is overtly used in mainstream film to parody expected gender roles and controversial points of sexual orientation. The men are seen as weak and the women as ball-busting psychos. It's an easy laugh.

The majority of dominatrix roles are found in foreign fare with the most famous being Bulle Ogier in *Maitresse*. This artful Barbet Schroeder exploitation film provides a proper tour guide for an intimate exploration of D/s. Another more sexualized scenario played out in *The Image* (also released as *The Mistress and the Slave*), Radley Metzger's take on the power relationships. These mid-'70s films were products of the '60s sexual revolution. This era gave more screen time to D/s than it had ever gotten before. The party would be over by the '80s with D/s safely tucked back into the cinematic closet.

Somewhere between these tropes are tepid thrillers that further enforce the relationship between sexual fetish and criminality. These works remove sexual pleasure and emotional fulfillment from the equation, leaving the sensationalistic aspects of torture and bondage at the fore. The most infamous use of BDSM as a murder weapon comes courtesy of Uli Edel's *Body of Evidence* where kinky sex is put on trial with emphasis on Madonna's turn as a *femme fatale*. Characters are emotionless automatons with progressive sexual interests shown as a false option for actual personal connection.

Meanwhile, Brett Leonard's *Feed* puts a cop on the trail of fetishists around the globe. Though consensual, there is no safe or sane sex in this 2005 film. The plot plays out against the world of fat admirers (chubby chasers) by way of a murderous sociopath who feeds women to death to work out issues with his mother. Stylishly shot with an ironic soundtrack ("Yummy Yummy," "Cherish," "Tainted Love"), there is no attempt to portray fat admiration (or any other fetish) as anything other than freakish, dangerous, and — ultimately — at the heart of a crime.

The 2006 film *Consequences* (a.k.a.

Playroom) is an early cheapie entry in the torture porn cycle popularized by the *Saw* and *Hostel* films (by way of *Judgment Night* and *Deliverance*). The tale of five friends who go on their annual wild weekend trip; two of the horn-dogs leave a bar with a pair of hotties only to fall into the mad machinations of a filmmaker who likes to groan and wear a lot of jewelry.

With scenes looking like they're right out of a porn film, the only difference is that the guys aren't having fun getting corn-holed and spanked. Films like *Body of Evidence*, *Feed*, and *Consequences* give the scene a bad name with their misleading impressions.

Exit to Eden exemplifies the awkward marriage of the criminal and sexual underworlds. The peculiar mix of pain and power coupled with the intrinsic raw emotion of D/s subject matter gives a reputation of prurient madness. The subject matter telegraphs an association with the seedier side of life. Those who engage and enjoy the edgy activities walk a razor-thin line of normalcy, if not legality.

Penned as erotica, Anne Rice's tale was unsuccessfully grafted onto a comedic espionage plot, resulting in something that resembled *The Story of O* as a hot slapstick mess. Adapted by Bob Brunner and Deborah Amelon in 1994, there are few intersections of the over-arching plot with the adult story of Mistress Lisa (Dana Delany) and her new submissive Elliot (Paul Meurion). Even people who'd disavow genital torture might rethink it if given the option between that and enduring Rosie O'Donnell and Dan Akroyd in a tacked-on bit involving international intrigue on an island of dominants and submissives. The stick is laid on so thick and the depiction of D/s so stilted that any shred of erotica is as muted as a ball-gagged subbie.

Sadly, Mistress Lisa may be entrenched fully in a D/s world but she harbors dreams of a vanilla life. These are as shameful to her as a need for BDSM is to a so-called straight person. Similarly, Tanya Cheex (the lovely Guinevere Turner) keeps her vanilla past locked away from the other patrons of her House of Thwax in *Preaching to the Perverted*. This 1997 UK film follows the British blueprint of outsiders finding acceptance as seen in *Kinky Boots* and *Just like a Woman*.

If judging solely by their filmic representations, dominatrices are flawed females who lack the love of the right man. They are shrews in bustiers and black leather waiting to be tamed. This hysteria lies at the center of Neil Coombs's *Dom* (a.k.a. *The Dominatrix*) and, to some extent, Eric Werthman's *Going Under*. These unusual melodramas from 2004 balance power exchange and romance with some awkward, albeit interesting, results.

In the early years of the 21st Century, two films have brought D/s to the fore; Steven Shainberg's *Secretary* (2002) and Robert Cuffley's *Walk All Over Me* (2007). These look at both sides of the D/s coin; *Secretary* the bottom and *Walk* the top.

Though *Secretary* is an erotically charged examination of power exchange, the protagonist, Lee Holloway (Maggie Gyllenhaal) suppresses her need for self-mutilation via spanking. Everything turns out for the best in the end, but initiating the D/s relationship between Holloway and her boss, E. Edward Grey (James Spader) requires

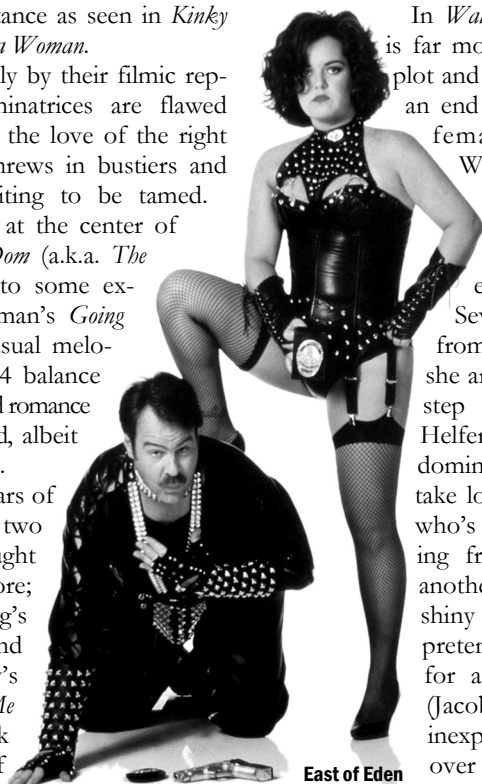
an inherent flaw in Holloway as opposed to a genuine need. The mind-set reflected sees D/s as a lifestyle choice and not an integral part of one's personality. However, *Secretary* allows viewers to understand D/s as a form of therapy. Holloway and Grey play off each other; one's yin to the other's yang. Together they exorcise their demons in a deeply personal and satisfying exploration.

In *Walk All Over Me*, D/s is far more ancillary to the plot and merely a means to an end for the two main female characters.

When Alberta (Leelee Sobieski, looking like the lovechild of Helen Hunt and Chloë Sevigny) runs away from her dead-end life she arrives on the doorstep of Celene (Tricia Helfer), a Vancouver dominatrix. It doesn't take long until Alberta – who's known for jumping from one mess to another – dons some shiny leather boots and pretends to be Celene for a new client, Paul (Jacob Tierney). She inexplicably falls head over heels for him in a matter of minutes,

shortly before learning that he's involved with some dangerous dudes from Ontario. This begins a convoluted plot involving stolen money, ruined expectations and bondage.

Despite the upscale lifestyle that Celene enjoys – in her nurse, cop, or army outfits – it's all artifice. The same can be said for the film's D/s quotient; it's used for the wacky factor as well as



East of Eden

an aid in creating an uneasy blend of comedy and crime drama, revisiting the errors of *Exit to Eden*.

Celene lacks empathy for her clients and sees them as living cash machines. She could've been a spokesmodel or acted in Community Theater if the pay were better. Instead, she's using her vocation as a domme as a shortcut to her life plan of becoming an actress. The rare domme, Celene uses her real name and doesn't put up many barriers between herself and her clients. Perhaps because she's so superficial she has nothing to hide. There's little discussion of professionalism or the lack of sexual contact/intercourse involved with being a pro-domme. Even Alberta assumes that the trappings of domination – floggers, feathers, leather masks, et cetera – are merely accoutrements of a prostitute. It's far easier to fathom that a man would pay for sex than to be debased at the behest of another person.

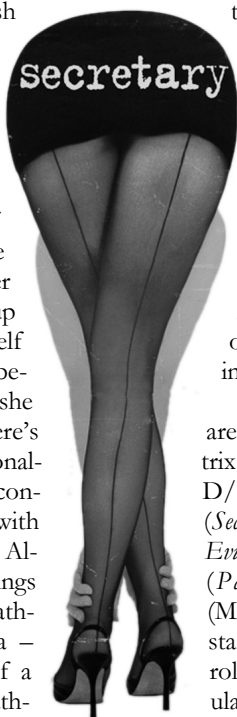
Outside of Hollywood or well-funded Indie fare, D/s boasts porn auteurs and hacks taking swipes at the subject. The best explorer of fetishes, Maria Beatty, has provided a steady stream of artfully-directed films which spotlight subjects such as tickling (*Box of Laughter*), spanking (*The Elegant Spanking*), medical fetishism (*Doctor's Orders*), Weimar perversity (*Ecstasy in Berlin 1926*), and other taboo topics. At the other end of the spectrum sits D. Stevens's 2006 effort *The Pet*. Marketed as an empathetic exploration of D/s, the film is a pathetic exploitation tale dressed in leather. Lukewarm erotica at best, *The Pet* is reminiscent of the worst

parts of *Exit to Eden* with its tepid human trafficking plot and unbearable acting. To call star Andrea Edmondson wooden would be an insult to trees.

Be it sensual or sexual, D/s eludes explanation because much of it takes place above the neck and not below the waist. A wonderful alternative to copulation in diseased time (bodies clad head-to-toe in latex redefines safe sex); D/s is the most difficult sex play of all as it requires an active imagination.

Portrayals of D/s in cinema are scant with positive dominatrix roles. Characters engaged in D/s are mentally imbalanced (*Secretary*), dangerous (*Body of Evidence*, *Pulp Fiction*), or deadly (*Payback*). Lady Heather (Melinda Clarke) of TV's *C.S.I.* stands as one of few positive role models of dominas in popular culture, though she's had bad luck with crimes taking place in her Las Vegas dungeon (and her penchant for vigilante justice isn't necessarily admirable). Even though the show's main character returned to Lady Heather in his time of need, she ultimately lost out to the good girl.

It's not up to every cheesy comedy, lame action film or coming-of-age tale to provide humanistic portrayals of D/s and dommes. Kink can be funny, strange or even cute. Mainstream acceptance shouldn't be thrust upon cinematic D/s – the taboo nature enhances the excitement – though it doesn't need to be shorthand for criminality, unhappiness or insanity. Despite its integration into a handful of films, D/s still has its leather boot in the back door of cinema.



The fin de siècle of the Twentieth Century hosted a disproportionately large amount of documentaries centered on the eroticism of power exchange and fetish lifestyle. The tectonic shift from the '70s swinging free love to the '80s plague paranoia brought about major changes in sexuality and a gradual change in acceptable societal behavior. This seems to have intrigued directors to challenge audiences and censors. In Europe, specifically Germany, a 1985 film by Klaus Tuschien, *Domina – Die Last mit der Lust*, proved an early entry in what would become a common exercise of documenting the theory and practice of what is loosely defined as bondage & discipline or sadomasochistic relationships (BDSM).

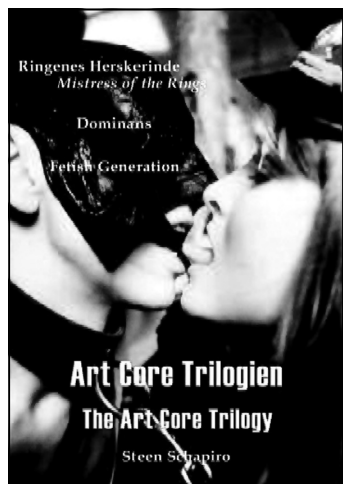
Germany continued to be a reliable source for similar films, joined in the 1990s by Denmark and finally, the United States with Michelle Handelman's 1995 *Bloodsisters* starring Queen Cougar and Pat Califia. This hotly contested work upset conservative audiences with its combination of extreme fetish and lesbian subject matter. Yet, this opened the door for other films including Nick Broomfield's *Fetishes*. Shown on HBO in 1997, *Fetishes* exposed an untold number of viewers to progressive sexual relationships and opened the floodgates for dozens of subsequent works that have tread similar ground, focusing on the many facets of power exchange.

Dominans (Steen Schapiro, 1994, Denmark)

The middle chapter of Steen Schapiro's Art Core Trilogy, *Dominans* is a beautifully-shot meditation. The 40-minute work is broken into three chapters that focus on two dominant females and one dominant male. That their submissives aren't given a voice isn't an issue as the dominants sound completely in touch with their submissives' feelings and needs.

Shooting in three Danish S&M clubs, Schapiro draws back the curtain to reveal the dynamics of some very complex and rich relationships. The paradoxes – freedom that can be gained through submission, the gifts received when giving up everything, the sensitivity to your lover's needs when one's playing the role of a hardened dominant – are all brought to light.

Schapiro allows the participants to speak for themselves, avoiding the inclusion of a pedantic expert to legitimize the practices described and demonstrated. Apparently the Danish government felt that everything was legitimate enough to fund *Dominans*, have it shown on public television, and make it available as an educational tool in any of the country's public libraries.



Bloodsisters (Michelle Handelman, 1995, USA)

Delving deep, this film documents a subculture within a subculture: the BDSM scene within the lesbian circle of San Francisco. Seen by some within the community as being traitors to the

DOCUMENTING THE SCENE

BY MIKE WHITE

cause, the practitioners are the queerest of the queer.

The group's strong desire for self-definition shines through this leather-swathed documentary. Director Michelle Handelman expresses this via scenes of activism, demonstrations of techniques, and discussions of terminology by the participants of *Bloodsisters*.

In direct contrast to Steen Schapiro's *Dominans*, Handelman fell victim to the Puritanical mores of America. The film was flogged by the conservative American Family Association as exemplifying the immoral uses of the National Endowment of the Arts.

Strictly Speaking (Kirk Demorest, 1996, USA)

While *Bloodsisters* occasionally becomes mired in mid-'90s video effects, Kirk Demorest's *Strictly Speaking* is lousy with them. *Strictly Speaking* centers on Mistress Karen, who narrates the film, explaining terms, implements, and concepts. Shown in small floating boxes, Mistress Karen is visually fragmented. This technique keeps the viewer from fully seeing the twenty-something dome which feels appropriate as Mistress Karen slowly doles out personal information. Near the end of the hour-long work, she drops a bombshell: our faithful narrator reveals that though a professional dominatrix she's still a virgin. Dangerous role play is still the safest sex in town!

Also helping with the proceedings is model/actress Monique Parent, who struts her stuff in fetish garb, demonstrating a few of the practices discussed. The visuals are peppered with stock clips from films like *Ceram Una Volta...*, *The April Fools*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* to display the pervasive presence of fetish-based themes in popular culture. This clever use of pre-existing material is only outshone by the insightful discussion of the nascent internet and its impact on the scene.

Fetishes (Nick Broomfield, 1996, USA)

Part of the *American Undercover* series of HBO documentaries, Nick Broomfield's piece could have easily been a freak of the week exploitation of society's demersal elements. Instead, the film is a relatively evenhanded look at a heretofore unexplored underworld; the contemporary urban professional dungeon.

The bulk of *Fetishes* takes place at Pandora's Box, an upscale dungeon at the heart of Manhattan's Mid-Town where it hides in plain sight. Broomfield focuses on several of the professional dommes at the establishment, exploring their scene specialties as well as their home lives. At the crux of *Fetishes* is the question of whether the women who help craft the psychodramas all day at work can (and should) divorce themselves of this during their off hours.

Broomfield misses the opportunity to display life at Pandora's Box between appointments. By avoiding the mundane life in the dungeon looks fairly glamorous. This is starkly contrasted by Eva Heldmann's 2007 documentary about a professional dungeon cum brothel in Germany, *Five Sex Rooms and a Kitchen*. Heldmann's



film shows the daily grind of operating a house of ill-repute.

Several scenes in *Fetishes* are remarkable in their raw emotion including submissive fetish film director Maria Beatty examining her bottom after a particularly vicious beating and one domme explaining the pain of womanhood to a client engaged in feminization. Broomfield focuses on the more extreme clientele and often sounds unsympathetic in his narration.

Playing to the large HBO audience, *Fetishes* helped legitimize the scene; paving the way for more mainstream acceptance of these sorts of documentaries. Additionally, Broomfield's aesthetic also helped establish the trappings of so-called reality television.

A Weekend at Miss Martindale's (Laurie Sparham, 1996, UK)

Marianne Martindale's mystic realm, Aristasia, is situated in an English suburb. The neighbors don't seem to know what to make of the statuesque Martindale (nee Catherine Tyrell) and the cavalcade of girls stopping by for a stint at her school.

Sparham's film never rises out of the mire of Martindale's Aristasia claptrap. Entranced by the sound of her own voice, Martindale waxes poetic about her fantastic gyno-centric kingdom. This plays poorly against the film's visuals which are more appropriate to a low grade porn film than a documentary.

The Marquesa: Portrait of a Dominatrix (Karen Young, 1997, Canada)

The opposite of *A Weekend at Miss Martindale's*, Karen Young allows her subject, Toronto's Marquesa, to voice her erudite opinions about the scene and her history as a professional dominatrix. Her interview is punctuated with beautifully-shot vignettes that demonstrate a wide range of interests.

Young allows another domme and several slaves to speak, giving *Marquesa* a valuable balance. Likewise, the use of music from J. Ibsen works well to set the tone throughout the video.

Didn't Do It for Love (Monika Treut, 1997, Germany)

The boom period for scene documentaries was a busy time for Ava Taurel (nee Eva Norvind nee Eva Johanne Chegodayeva Sakonskaya). The main subject of this Monika Treut film, Taurel also appeared in *Whipped* and *Tops & Bottoms*.



A Norwegian beauty, Taurel was a Mexican cinema sex symbol in the '60s before becoming one of the most outspoken dommes in New York City in the '80s. These two slices of Taurel's life, along with several others, are on display in Treut's multifaceted film. While Taurel has led a disparate life, too much of the film consists of talking head interviews that don't manage to express the wild ride she took.

Whipped (Sasha Waters & Iana Porter, 1998, USA)

Picking up where *Didn't Do It for Love* left off, Sasha Waters's and Iana Porter's work focuses on three dommes, including Ava Taurel. The

audience shares more scenes of Taurel interacting with her submissive, Gerard O'Neal. Also along for the ride are Mistress Sonja Blaze and her co-owner of the Arena/Blaze dungeon, Mistress Carrie Cokely.

The parallels between *Whipped* and *Fetishes* are plentiful; same shit, different dungeon. The biggest differences lay in the production values and the intimacy of the two films. Certainly that Waters and Porter are women helped increase the empathy between filmmaker and subject but not enough to overcome the problems of this rambling film.

Tops & Bottoms (Cristine Richey, 1999, Canada)

"How do you let your dark desires out?" asks the breathy female narrator of *Tops & Bottoms*, another documentaries about the dark and secretive underworld of BDSM. What sets *Tops & Bottoms* apart from the glossy titillation of Nick Broomfield's *Fetishes* or the meandering *Whipped* is director Cristine Richey's presentation of sexually deviant history from the Flagellants of the Middle Ages to today.

Richey provides an historic development of BDSM as contemporary culture knows it, showing that subcultures tend to flourish in times of great societal repression. Take for example Victorian England where caning was popularized; a glimpse at modern British skin mags reveals that spanking and caning are still of interest in their psychosexual fantasies. Likewise, while Mom and Apple Pie were glorified as being All-American in the 1950s, Irving Klaw was cranking out bondage-themed nudie-cuties starring America's Naughty Sweetheart, Bettie Page.

To give viewers a glimpse at the modern scene, Richey interjects the story of creepy dominant Robert Dante, his wife Mary, and their new slave Mercedes. We're given the opportunity to see Robert breaking in Mercedes as well as hearing the polyamorous trio describe their backgrounds and opine their need to be either dominant or submissive. Along with this, Richey presents viewers with a plethora of psychological explanations for the fulfillment garnered in a romantic power exchange.

By showing fetishism in modern advertising, Richey seems to imply that BDSM subculture has encroached into the mainstream. Can BDSM move from the shadowy corners of sexuality and be accepted, if not at least acknowledged, as a viable form of self-expression? The reality is that non-traditional sexual roles are still considered perverse and shameful. For women, submission is wrongfully perceived to fly in the face of feminism as it is confused with abject passivity and a denial of one's self-determination. For men, submission is seen as a shirking of masculine responsibility.

Occasionally the documentary becomes overly clinical in its study of Dominant and submissive roles in history that are meant to parallel those in a psychosexual relationship. A reliance on Erich Fromm's theories about man's fear of freedom and the wish to give up free will may confuse audiences with the metaphorical comparisons of the inter-relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and a dom/me and his/her submissive. Likewise, this may give the impression that BDSM can be likened to a personal form of fascism. This complicated fetishism of power is further explored in the 2008 Israeli documentary *Stalags* by Ari Libsker.

Beyond Vanilla (Claes Lilja, 2001, USA)

The opening scene of *Beyond Vanilla* shows director Claes Lilja explaining that one

has to venture into areas which are a little uncomfortable in order to understand them. Audiences of *Beyond Vanilla* undoubtedly begin at a level of slight discomfort brought about by the seemingly ceaseless opening montage that sets a breakneck editing pace, only slowing slightly when the film finally settles on a subject before quickly jumping to the next. From there, the distress only increases as Lilja delves deeper than any of the aforementioned documentaries have gone thus far.

Rather than a simple discourse on impact play in its various forms (spanking, flogging, whipping, caning, etc), *Beyond Vanilla* touches on topics as diverse as breath control, piercing, cutting, ball-stretching, catheterization, electrical play, water sports, coprophilia, and fisting. Moreover, Lilja's documentary is one of the first to openly acknowledge that gay men enjoy hardcore power play, too.

Too many documentaries try to separate the scene from sex as if attempting to legitimize the practice of professional domination and further extricate it from prostitution. Essentially, this neuters BDSM play of its fun and turns the practice into a mixture of fashion show and psychodrama. BDSM can exist without sex and sex can exist without BDSM. In *Beyond Vanilla* there is no mutual exclusion as interviewees admit to enjoying orgasms from these activities!

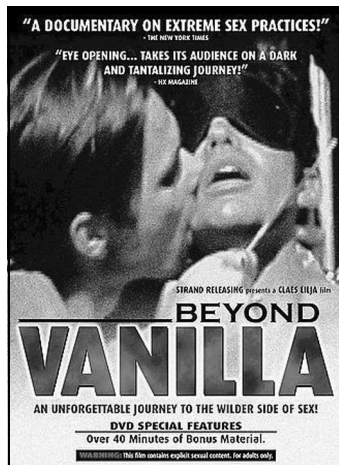
Beyond Vanilla is not without its flaws. Lilja's appearances prove highly distracting as do his use of cheap video effects that lend a camcorder feel to the proceedings. Star wipes, color filters, and cheesy on-screen titles threaten to undermine the tone, if not credibility, of the film as a whole. Luckily, the subject matter and strong interviews (apart from pedantic how-to instructor Kevin Dailey) keep *Beyond Vanilla* on track as one of the most comprehensive and open-minded scene documentaries yet.

Bound for Pleasure (David Blyth, 2002, New Zealand)

Going down under, this film focuses on a wide cross-section of dommes in New Zealand from the eloquent Mistress J (author of [Private Theater](#)) to a Dominant family who're the Kiwi equivalent of white trash. The interviewees stress the difference between a pro-domme and a "hooker with a whip" before contrasting strict and sensual domination. This is one of the few documentaries which address the all-important process of aftercare – the treatment of a submissive when a scene comes to a close and they are in another headspace; high on fantasy and endorphins. This is also one of the only films that discuss strap-on play and the way gender can be transformed during a scene.

BDSM - Alternative Loving (Courtney Smith, 2002, Canada)

There's a refreshing slickness to Courtney Smith's investigation of alternative loving. Narrated by the honey-voiced Angela Bowie (ex-wife of David), Smith attempts to make the definitive documentary on the scene. From Caligula to de Sade to Bettie Page, *BDSM - Alternative Loving* begins with a history of kink and the pre-



requisite definition of terms. The attempt at being all-encompassing along with the need to legitimize the alternative to the mainstream tends to dilute the impact of its message. Couple this with echoed sentiments amongst the interviews and the film threatens to get redundant.

Fortunately, Smith's work delves deeper and casts its net farther than other works of its ilk, bringing to light several topics heretofore unexplored in previous documentaries. Viola Johnson discusses the differences between slavery and submission – two terms that some find interchangeable where others find the former term offensive due to its historical connotations. This speaks to the idea of transformation running throughout Smith's film. When violence is consensual, it ceases to be violence. Pain becomes intense sensation. Slavery stems from love. And, in actuality, submissives hold the power as they can end the scene with one utterance of their safe word.

Smith also spotlights the scene's secret shame: Gor. Based on John Norman's fantasy book series and turned into a way of life, Gorean play is the BDSM equivalent of Scientology. This only receives a brief mention while the section on forniphilia (the use of bodies as furniture) goes on for too long and lacks the ability to convey its appeal to either forniphiliac artist Jeff Gord or his models.

While not perfect, *BDSM - Alternative Loving* is an admirable effort.



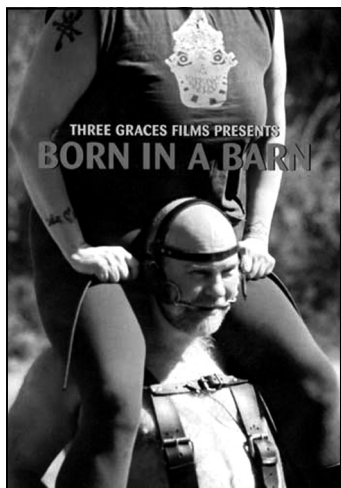
Headspace (Mia Olin, 2003, USA)

Fetish: Pain or Pleasure? (Ania and Bob Shami, 2005, USA)

These two documentaries are somewhere between vanity projects and infomercials, encapsulating all of the elements that can subvert meaningful documentary films. Mia Olin's *Headspace* follows a clique of performance artists enjoying sexual shock for shock's sake. Their insular group objects to the opinions and actions of anyone outside of their clique. Meanwhile, *Fetish: Pain or Pleasure?* plays as a seventy-five minute advertisement for three pro-dommes. That two of the groups have gone out of business since the film comes as no surprise; one of them seemed so ashamed of her profession that she was shot in silhouette the entire time, like a repentant criminal.

Born in a Barn (Elizabeth Elson, 2005, USA)

Rather than taking on the broad range of fetishes which can comprise a BDSM scene, Elizabeth Elson focuses solely on pony play. Best known through Anne Rice's *Beauty* series, pony play is a type of role-play wherein humans are dressed and treated like horses. At the center of Elson's work is Trigger, an older guy with a big gut and strong shoulders who is having a barn built for himself to play into his desired lifestyle. While interesting in the way pony play may (or may not) be used for foreplay, the documentary tends to drag even at its abbreviated 50-minute length.



Liberty in Restraint (Michael Ney, 2005, Australia)

The story of photographer Noel Graydon, an Australian fetish photographer and dom, Michael Ney's meandering documentary explores Graydon's career, past misdeeds, and the part he plays in his sexually deviant community. Graydon works to bring the fetish world into the light of sanctity. "The amount of dark images I've done with fetish is minimal because I'm actually trying to show the light and the beauty and the love," Graydon says.

Liberty in Restraint gives a lot of screen time to Graydon's friend, Mistress Felina, an expert in rope bondage who puts her subjects in elaborate Japanese configurations (shibari). Her work provides the photographer with some remarkable

images. Other interviewees include members of the Sydney Hellfire Club, DV8 House, and well appreciated practitioners.

Filled with his lush photography, the film is a trifle schizophrenic with infrequent stops throughout to host interviews with members of the scene. This uneven mixture puts the viewer on rocky ground – providing too much of one thing and not enough of another.

Tears before Bedtime (Kevin Klehr, 2006, Australia)

Unlike Nick Broomfield, director Kevin Klehr bites the bullet and undergoes a light flogging during his film. *Tears before Bedtime* focuses on a handful of fetishists in Australia with special attention to eloquent Mistress Synna and effusive submissive Paul. The majority of the film consists of talking head interviews with subjects recounting their histories, boundaries and proclivities.

Algolagnia (Túlio Bambino, 2006, Brazil)

Despite its abbreviated half hour running time, Túlio Bambino manages to pack a lot of information into *Algolagnia*. Named after another term for sadomasochism, "algolagnia" is just one of words Bambino works to define. At one point the screen is filled with fetish terminology spanning an impossible gamut. Like some of the subjects in *Tears before Bedtime*, participants in *Algolagnia* speak about the wide and varied playing field of fetishism and how one continually pushes one's boundaries; as with narcotics, "You start small and you want more and more," confesses subject Rosa Negra.

Bambino does well to profile a cross section of Brazilian scenesters with a wide range of experience. *Algolagnia* addresses the prejudice against switches – people who play either the Dominant or submissive roles. These adventurous souls are often condemned as being indecisive.

None of the film's participants are shown clearly – they're masked, blurred, turned away from the camera, or fragmented in extreme close-up. This anonymity implies the lack of acceptance of BDSM in Brazilian society, perhaps due to the strong religious hold on their culture. To date, no English language documentary has breached the religious implications of a fetish-friendly lifestyle.

Vice & Consent (Howard Scott Warshaw, 2006, USA)

Described as “the last form of sexuality where you have to take classes to do it right,” the importance of education in and about power exchange relations is at the heart of *Vice & Consent*. Howard Scott Warshaw’s film is highly informative with screens featuring definitions (top, bottom, to do a scene, etc.) and its struggle to disprove the stereotypes held about participants in the lifestyle.

Contrasting the notions broadcast via popular media and pornography, *Vice & Consent* stresses the importance of community, safety, and negotiation. The myth that BDSM is an open forum in which adults work out childhood sexual trauma comes to the fore with participants relating their introduction to the practice and how they learned the ropes. A few even submit that some people are kinky by nature, not by choice.

There are many familiar faces in *Vice & Consent* including Evil Mommy Tina, Lady Green (a.k.a. Janet Hardy), and Jay Wiseman; all three were interviewed in Claes Lilja’s *Beyond Vanilla*. However, better production values, make-up and lighting have them all looking far better here. Along with other luminaries such as Midori (*The Seductive Art of Japanese Bondage*), Clea Dubois, and Dossie Easton (to name a few), *Vice & Consent* boasts an eloquent host of interviewees.

While espousing the benefits of being true to oneself and opening up one’s mind to different possibilities, there is also the truthful nugget that the taboo nature of BDSM gives it some of its allure. As Mollena Williams says, “Rubbing against social mores makes it hot.”

Susan for Now (Robin Franzi, 2007, USA)

Opening as a first-person account of a woman finding herself and her sexual fulfillment, Robin Franzi’s film quickly becomes an exploration of the overall BDSM scene in Seattle. “I used to say my name was ‘Susan, for now’ until I got to know

people better,” says Franzi. “The nickname sort of stuck, particularly when I started exploring this lifestyle. I researched and experimented with BDSM play and, though I was no stranger to what it meant, it was the first time I had a chance to explore firsthand.”

Doing well to ignore the pro-domme arena that too many films explore, *Susan for Now* deals with the reality of individuals who engage in role-play activities as their primary means of expression and satisfaction. Interviewees relate how they became involved in the scene and, if they’re open members, how coming out has affected their lives.

The personal aspect of *Susan for Now* gives the film a refreshingly honest outlook on the scene.

BDSM: It’s Not What You Think (Erin Palmquist, 2008, USA)

Meant to dispel stereotypes and stigmas about the scene, Erin Palmquist’s half-hour docu-



mentary is a beautifully-shot high level overview of kink. Originally a student project, the film transcends its budgetary constraints to deliver a concise, albeit cursory, discussion of BDSM. Palmquist includes humorous vignettes shot as early silent films. These recast scenes of damsels in distress in a new, fetishistic light and speak to the idea of rethinking one's expectations and exploring oneself. "[After] any good BDSM session, I know more about myself when it's done than I did going into it," says Janet Hardy.

Graphic Sexual Horror (Barbara Bell & Anna Lorentzon, 2009, USA)

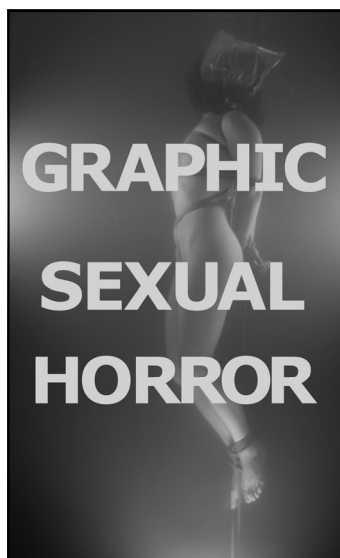
That there can be beauty found in torture proves to be the troublesome core of *Graphic Sexual Horror*. A look at InSex.com, this website pushed boundaries via its live stream video of extreme bondage and anguish. The brainchild of pd (real name Brent Scott), InSex.com featured a cavalcade of attractive young women undergoing myriad tortments usually resulting in involuntary responses varying from forced orgasm to tears. These wild scenarios were only limited by the fertile and frightening imagination of pd and his website's subscribers.

Directors Lorentzon and Bell (author of [Stacking in Rivertown](#)) document the rise and fall of the flagitious empire via frank interviews with several key players both behind the scenes and in front of the camera as well as footage that entertained patrons of the website. Though these clips often resembled a serial killer's fantasies, the models were armed with safe words, paid top dollar for their trouble, and even sought out pd to session with the ingenious sadist. When things went beyond where they should have, as was apt to happen with such extreme scenes, the results could be both scary and fascinating!

Eventually InSex.com was brought down by a combination of problems inside the scene (pd supporting a spooky drug addict) and outside of the sexually dynamic operation (the Office of Homeland Security pressured companies providing merchant accounts to the site). During its run InSex gave new definition to the beauty of agony that shocked many, and pleased many more.

During the twenty five years since Tuschén's *Domina - Die Last mit der Lust*, the amount of mastigophoric movies has continued to steadily increase. This reflects both the rise of the documentary as well as frankness about so-called deviant sexual behavior. Not only are these films on the rise, festivals like Germany's Fetish Film Festival (fetish-film-festival.de) and New York's Cinekink festival (cinekink.com) are dedicated to programming fetish, kink, and dirty movies and have been founded to support films like those discussed in this article.

Ultimately, these films offer glimpses into the rich history of psycho-dynamics behind BDSM relationships, and the beautiful ballet that can take place on the dark stage of our minds.



VIDEO REVIEWS

BY JOSHUA GRAVEL
& MIKE WHITE

Abar: The First Black Superman (Frank Packard, 1977, USA)

When a black family moves to a lily white neighborhood all hell breaks

loose. First mistaken by their overtly racist neighbor as the servants for the new family, the Kinkades consist of the doctor father (J. Walter Smith), his wife (Roxie Young) and their two kids. The family quickly finds their house surrounded by picketers, protesting their presence. When John Abar (Tobar Mayo), crusader, and the rest of B.F.U. (Black Front of Unity) hear the announcement of a black family moving into a white neighborhood on the radio news (!) they jump on their hogs to check out the situation.

Though his logic may be a bit shaky, Doctor Kinkade has moved his family in order to have privacy for his unorthodox experiments. He's creating a formula to turn man into a super being. If you guess that Abar is going to quaff that potion, you're right on. But don't get ahead of yourself. It takes a lot of racist incidents, a few playbacks of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and about an hour before Abar finally downs the serum.

Originally set to wear a lime green jumpsuit with "SB" on the front (for "Super Black," of course), Abar gets to keep his chic suit when he gains his superpowers. You'd never know that a super being walks among us as his powers manifest with a close-up on his eyes and a high-pitched noise on the soundtrack; turning spaghetti into worms, giving a prostitute the wherewithal to bust up her pimp, inspiring street thugs to enroll in college, showing up a preacher for riding a flashy car, and seemingly sending the Kindkades' racist neighbors into the Phantom Zone.



Shot in 1974, it took three years until *Abar* got a release. The low rent production suffers

from a jaw-dropping earnestness and some terrible performances (namely J. Walter Smith, who also rewrote a lot of the script). Fortunately, *Abar* ultimately succeeds even when Tobar Mayo twists his tongue around the hackneyed dialogue. A very unusual entry in the Blaxploitation pantheon, *Abar* confronts racism head on while providing hope and a rare black superhero – far better than Meteor Man, Blank Man, or even Steel. Abar's the real deal and this shockingly sincere movie ultimately serves to provide hope. - MW

The Baron (Phillip Fenty, 1977, USA)

When people think of Blaxploitation films they picture guns, dope dealers, pimps, and big afro hairdos. The films that defy that core of pimps, players, and private eyes provide the most interesting fare. Phillip Fenty's *The Baron* may have its share of mobsters, drug pushers, and car crashes but centers on an independent filmmaker struggling to bring his vision to life.

Calvin Lockhart stars as Jason, a hustler trying to make a good life for himself

and his wife (Marlene Clark). He's working on (and starring in) a movie about Baron Wolfgang von Tripps, a formula one race car driver. The closer he comes to completing the film, the more obstacles get in his way. His Hollywood partner (Raymond St. Jaques) has a studio willing to finance it in full... if it's remade with a white actor and without Jason's involvement. Meanwhile, Jason's partner back in New York, Cokeman (Charles McGregor) comes under pressure from Joey (Richard Lynch), a mob boss.

Joey is so evil that one of his henchmen has a hook instead of a hand. The scenes between Joey and Cokeman might initially play as comical as Joey begins denigrating his loud wardrobe ("You look like a clown"). The laughs give way to shocked gasps as Joey's taunts begin to gain an increasingly racist edge. The scene of Joey torturing Cokeman, while a henchman plays old time tinny piano tunes, succeeds in thoroughly disturbing the audience. Joey's blatant racist patter contrasts with the subtle cuts made by the high society folks to which Jason panders when looking for more funding.

Cokeman works to keep Jason grounded, taking him to the seedy side of town to remind him of their roots. They watch as a woman is assaulted on the streets, Cokeman reminiscing about the good old days. He wants Jason to "start thinking about making money the way a nigger knows how." And, if Jason won't listen to reason, maybe a few rounds with Cokeman's Doberman pinschers might convince him.

A character as driven and self-centered as Jason runs the risk of alienating an audience. He sacrifices everything for his dream, damning anyone who gets in his way. With the twinkle in his eye and a con man's charm, the handsome Calvin Lockhart pulls off playing Jason perfectly. Even when he's being a bastard, he's sympathetic.

With any film about filmmaking it's tempting to assume that the work is wholly self-reflexive. When considering that writer/director Phillip Fenty wrote the screenplay for *Superfly*, the temptation becomes overwhelming. Perhaps Jason is a stand-in for Fenty, perhaps not. Regardless, *The Baron* remains an unusual and entertaining entry in the pantheon of Blaxploitation. - MW



The Boxer's Omen/Mo (Chih-Hung Kuei, 1983, Hong Kong)

The Shaw Brothers are known for their chop-sockey films but if you're looking for bare-fisted kung fu in *Boxer's Omen*, you're going to be sorely disappointed as there are only two bouts in the entire film. However, if you're seeking one of the most insane tales of sorcery, multi-colored gore, and puppetry then *Boxer's Omen* is the movie for you.

Chan Hung (Phillip Ko) is a gangster who gets saved from a back alley deal by an apparition of a Buddhist monk with a sprinkler behind him. "Follow me," the vision intones but Chan Hung is having none of it. He's got to get home and have

some sex with his girlfriend, pressing her ridiculously big boobs up against a rain-soaked window. The next day he visits his brother in the hospital. He's messed up pretty bad, a victim of bad sport fellow boxer Ba Bo (Bolo Yeung). Chan Hung swears revenge, going to Thailand to challenge Ba Bo. There he finds an image out of one of his visions at a Buddhist temple where he's welcomed by name. "We knew you were coming," says the HMIC (head monk in charge).

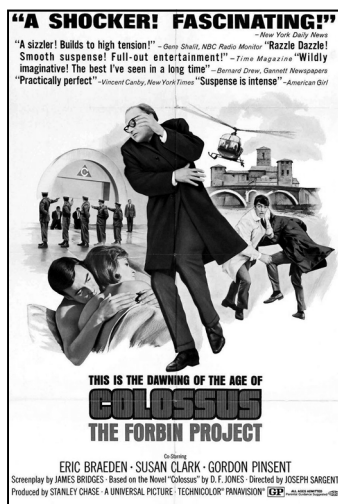
What follows is an incredibly long flashback of Abbot Quing Zhao (Elvis Tsui) taking on a couple of black magicians, turning one into an old woman who expels a bat puppet from her dying mouth and pissing off the other when Quing Zhao successfully destroys the bat puppet in an ornate ceremony. No matter how much the black wizard spits rat blood at a representative bat skeleton, he can't bring it back when Quing Zhao pounds it to dust with a golden hammer. Not to be outdone, the black wizard feeds green poison to three spider puppets and makes his way into Quing Zhao's temple, crawling up the ceiling to kill Quing Zhao. Don't worry, he's only *mostly* dead. And, since he was the twin brother of Chan Hung in another life, Hung can talk to his desiccated corpse and even avenge this spiritual brother too.

Rather than the typical training scene of Chan Hung learning some new style of kung fu with which he'll defeat his enemies, there's a montage of him sitting in an urn while his fellow monks channel their power to his hands via some animation. He's quickly ready for his first wizard battle. The black wizard wastes no time unleashing a herd of crocodile skulls with more bat puppets inside of them in another epic, silly, and gross battle.

Boxer's Omen boasts more than its fair share of intestines, goo, maggots, and regurgitation. The plot has Chan Hung bopping from Hong Kong to Thailand to Nepal on his quest to avenge his boxing and Buddhist brothers. The settings are incredibly impressive, especially the temple with the giant Buddha face and ornate wall carvings. There's never a dull moment and the plot turns on its own internal wizarding logic. Even in comparison with other Shaw Brothers films from the same era (*Black Magic*, *Seeding of a Ghost*) *Boxer's Omen* is a unique cinema experience. - MW

Colossus: The Forbin Project (Joseph Sargent, 1970, USA)

Long before Skynet became self-aware and the Matrix was in place, Colossus learned the wealth of human history and decided to become the world's dictator. *Colossus: The Forbin Project* pits man against machine at the height of the Cold War. Modeled after the defense computer at NORAD, Colossus and its Soviet counterpart, Guardian, hold the world hostage under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Written by D. F. Jones in 1966, Colossus is one of a series of wild computers along with HAL (2001: *A Space Odyssey*), WOPR (*War Games*), VGER (*Star Trek: The Motion Picture*), Proteus (*Demon Seed*) and Edgar (*Electric Dreams*).

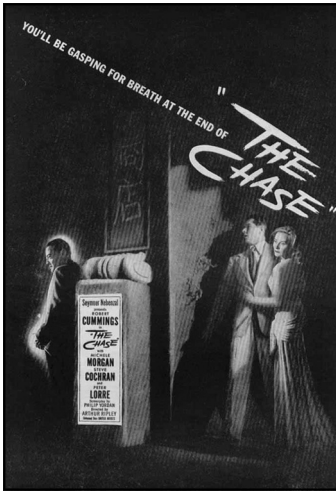


Like those other haywire machines, Colossus shares a fascination with human beings. How can something so inferior have created something so majestic? It's for that reason that Colossus studies his creator, Charles Forbin (Eric Braeden). The bulk of the film happens in a rather sterile computer room but the use of flashing lights and choice of angles keeps it interesting. Colossus treats people like ants. Forbin has it a little better as he's treated like a pet; a mouse which Colossus can bat around.

Perhaps *Colossus: The Forbin Project* isn't as well-known as other crazy computer films due to its bleak ending. A sequel to the film never came. However, D.F. Jones penned two more Colossus novels; *The Fall of Colossus* and *Colossus and the Crab*. Unfortunately, these take the frightening and possible scenario of a self-protective and overbearing computer system to improbable places. - MW

The Chase (Arthur Ripley, 1946, USA)

Scott Chuck (Robert Cummings) looks longingly at the flapjacks being flipped at the local greasy spoon. His hands go to his pockets though he knows he'll not find any money there, just a bottle of pills. They do nothing to fill his empty belly – though perhaps they ease his troubled mind. As he turns to go, his foot finds something; a wallet on the sidewalk. It's stuffed with dough and an identification card belonging to Eddie Roman. After a full meal and a good cigar, Scott takes the remaining cash and the wallet to its rightful owner – hunger beats out honesty at least a little bit.



We first see Eddie Roman (Steve Cochran) before Scott does. Roman's relaxing while getting his nails done. When the manicurist accidentally cuts a finger he gives her a mouth full of backhand, sending her crying out of the room. It's this display that Scott gets to see but he still takes the position of chauffeur when it's

offered a few minutes later. Roman likes to control things; his business, his car, and most-assuredly, his wife Lorna (Michele Morgan). Just as Scott stared into the diner, Lorna wistfully looks out to sea. She wants to get away from Roman's control and sees Scott as a way to escape. Scotty purchases two tickets to Havana... and that's when things get really weird.

The film's screenplay by Philip Yordan (*The Big Combo*, *Johnny Guitar*) is about 60% faithful to Cornell Woolrich's *The Black Path of Fear*. The characters and names remain similar as do the events that occur once Scott and Lorna reach Cuba. The order of events gets flip-flopped but Scott still ends up framed for murder and on the run from *la policia*. Things turn darker and all hope is lost... until Scott wakes up wearing his chauffeur uniform, not sure who he is or what's happened.

The Chase offers its protagonist the first film noir Mulligan. The audience becomes as muddled as Scott as he tries to learn who he is, what's real and what was in Scott's head. He's fortunate enough to get help from Commander Davidson

(Jack Holt), a Navy psychiatrist that may have prescribed those pills Scott wolfed down in the opening scene.

It's unfortunate that so much of Woolrich's novel was scrapped for Ripley's film. The most interesting character, Midnight (Yolanda Lacca) gets nary two minutes screen time when she's a major and fascinating character in the source material. Avoiding the bleak and wonderful hardboiled ending of Woolrich's book, the film appears to offer one a happy ending or maybe it doesn't... We leave Scott and Lorna in each other's arms but they're still in Havana and in the back of the carriage that took them to their original fate. - MW

Daybreakers (Michael & Peter Spierig, 2009, Australia)

Vampires have taken over earth and have sucked the world nearly out of blood. Humans are an endangered species, being hunted and pumped dry. Vampires are feeding on one another, figuratively and literally. Hematologist Edward Dalton (Ethan Hawkes) works tirelessly night after night to find a blood substitute. Despite the pressure from his cold-blooded boss, Charles Bromley (Sam Neill), Edward has little luck in the lab, succeeding only in discovering a serum to make volunteers explode.

Edward is not as enamored with his vampire existence as his human-hunting brother, Frankie (Michael Dormian). Opting for pig blood rather than human, Edward has gone without for so long that his ears have started getting pointy; an early symptom of blood deficiency. As the blood crisis grows worse, the divide between vampire and human increases. Edward throws in with a band of humans after he meets Lionel "Elvis" Corman (Willem Dafoe), a former vampire that got his heartbeat back in a freak accident. Edward sees Corman as just the thing to end the blood crisis.

As Edward, Hawke plays things with a wry determinism. He gets some good dialogue but it's Dafoe who steals the show with lines like, "Living in a world where vampires are the dominant species is about as safe as bare backing a five dollar whore."

The cinematography in *Daybreakers* plays well with the dichotomy between human and vampire by emphasizing the cold, fluorescent night and the warm, golden light of day. As daylight endangers Edward and his vampire ilk its beams cut through the dark of a shade tree and his blackout windows like lasers. The Spierig Brothers do a wonderful job giving life to a world of the undead. The advertising and product enhancements aimed at making the world a better place for vampires are ingenious.

I caught *Daybreakers* on a "bad movie night" with a friend of mine. We went in expecting the worst (*Another* vampire movie and *Ethan Hawke* to boot?) but were more than pleasantly surprised. The movie got dumped in the January doldrums where no respectable horror movie, even one with an environmental metaphor, should be. - MW



Ghosthouse (Umberto Lenzi, 1988, Italy)

Umberto Lenzi, of *Cannibal Ferrux* fame, steps into the haunted house genre with this ridiculous yet fascinating film.

A twentysomething couple, Martha and Paul, begin receiving strange cries for help via their HAM radio. They decide to use their clunky '80s computer set-up to calculate the location of the broadcast, which leads them to a creepy old abandoned house in a small town. Once there, the couple encounters a group of campers crashing at the house, a practical joking hitch-hiker, and the ghost of Henrietta whose family died in the house twenty years earlier. Along with the group of campers, Paul and Martha venture into the house and start investigating. As quickly as the group discovers just how dangerous the situation is, they begin getting picked off one by one.

The group go on to encounter a crazed groundskeeper, a ghost dog, entire rooms gone haywire, multiple apparitions of Henrietta, and a strange clown doll. After much haunting and many deaths (including one character being cut right in



half), and a scene in which Martha is besieged by a poltergeist wielding Easter decorations, we finally get to the haphazard conclusion (or should I say convolu-sion) of this story. It seems that Henrietta and her family ran the local funeral home and that the creepy clown doll was supposed to be buried with another young girl but Henrietta's father brought it home for her instead, hence the haunting. In a completely ridiculous ending, instead of following the conventions of ghost stories and returning the doll to its rightful owner to appease the angry spirit, Paul and Martha instead find Henrietta's body with the doll in her crypt and burn them together! But don't worry because all this happens after Death himself makes an appearance at the house!

I know this review may come off as quite critical, but I assure you I am recommending you find and watch this film. *Ghosthouse's* absurd mix of haunting and slasher film trappings are far more entertaining than I can convey.

If all the above info hasn't been enough to interest you in this unsung and nonsensical Umberto Lenzi masterpiece let me leave you with three more points.

1. In Spain and Italy the film was marketed as a sequel to the *Evil Dead* series, though it clearly has nothing to do with the Sam Raimi series.
2. Whenever the ghost appears it is accompanied by horrendous theme music which the other characters can hear.
3. It gives you the opportunity to ask such insightful questions such as, "Why do abandoned houses always seem to have running water and electricity?", "How come when they find Henrietta's crypt she looks as though she were buried yesterday and not twenty years ago?", and "Why is the ghost of Henrietta haunting them and not the ghost of the girl the clown doll was stolen from?"

I already mentioned Death and the Easter decorations right? - JG

How to Get Ahead in Advertising (Bruce Robinson, 1989, UK)

Is it any wonder that I went into marketing after seeing this movie? Made in the fine tradition of advertising films (*Lover Come Back*, *Putney Swope*, *Crazy People*), *How to Get Ahead in Advertising* undermines the artifice of ads in an attempt to show that truth is far from beauty.

Saddled with a pitch for a boil cream, the bombastic Dennis Dimbleby Bagley (Richard E. Grant) can't wrap his head around the right approach to selling the acne remedy. Wound far too tightly, Bagley begins exhibiting strange behavior at work and at home; purifying his place of residence of anything with a brand name and throwing frozen chickens in the loo. Though patient to a point, his wife Julia (Rachel Ward) comes to wits' end when Bagley gets a boil on his neck that he claims to have a voice of its own.

The head Bagley gets in advertising is a petulant carbuncle that embraces everything Bagley tries to reject. It speaks like a pithy voiceover announcer when it's not arguing with him. This second head clings to the values of advertising Bagley once held dear and it's not going to go quietly. It has other plans for Bagley.

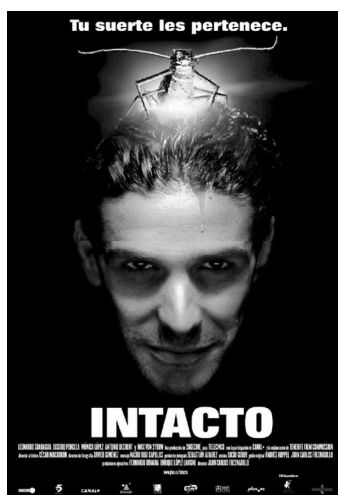
Richard E. Grant gives the performance of a lifetime in *How to Get Ahead in Advertising*. He goes from pompous ass to paranoia and back again, chewing up and spitting out writer/director Bruce Robinson's dialogue with aplomb. The film, Grant's third, paired him again with *Withnail and I* creator Robinson. Unfortunately, *How to Get Ahead* wasn't well-received upon release (at least in the U.S.) due, no doubt, to the wild mood swings of Bagley coupled with an ending that could be considered a downer by the small-minded.

Intacto (Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, 2001, Spain)

What if luck was a commodity? Something bought, sold, and – more often – won or lost in a wager? That's the question at the heart of Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's *Intacto*. The film stars Leonardo Sbaraglia as Tomás Sanz, the lone survivor of a plane crash. As the luck of his fellow passengers ran out, it transferred to him. Tomás quickly comes to the attention of Federico (Eusebio Poncela), a man who's truly down on his luck and wants to get it back. Years earlier he fell victim to the real star of the film, Samuel Berg (Max Von Sydow).

Clad all in white, Samuel acts as something of a fortune vampire; sustaining himself on the luck of others. He robs them with a simple touch of his hand, accumulating luck like spare change. Through the years since he survived a concentration camp, he's amassed a great fortune. He leaves behind those who had been free from jinxes to run afoul of fate. Luck can turn on a dime.

How can you cheat fate unless you test its mettle? That happens throughout *Intacto* with stirring scenes of a luck-fueled underworld where participants trade Polaroids of people whose fortunes they own. They play with dice, traffic, loaded guns or blindfold themselves and run headlong into a forest. The bigger the risk,



the bigger the reward.

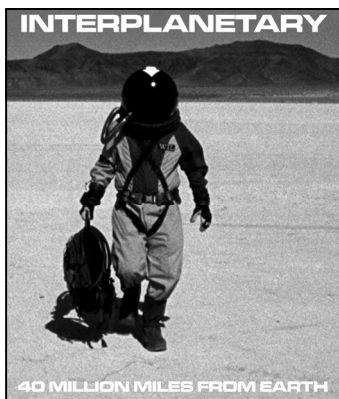
Intacto seems to have inspired Wayne Kramer's *The Cooler* about a man whose mere presence ends anyone's winning streak. The film definitely fueled the Prodigy music video for "Voodoo People" which features members of the band betting on a dozen blindfolded people who run through the city streets. - MW

The Lookout (Scott Frank, 2007, USA)

Chris Pratt wakes up. He takes a shower with soap. He tries to function in a world that's gotten a lot more confusing since the prom night car crash. He wants his old life back – girlfriend, friends, status as the high school hockey player.

He lives his life. He tries to cook dinner for him and his blind roommate Lewis (Jeff Daniels). He wants to be a teller at the bank where he works instead of mopping the floors at night. He meets the lovely Luvlee (Isla Fisher). He doesn't know she's too good to be true. He meets Gary (Matthew Goode), who treats him nicely and has a collection of pictures of banks.

He's a wonderful character; haunted by visions of his old girlfriend, Chris is trying to get his life together. He's played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt with great aplomb. He's supported by a terrific cast and a taut script by Scott Frank. The film plays with noir conventions, ringing with echoes of amnesia themes, holiday settings, and Midwestern crime. It shares a good deal with two 2005 films; Harold Ramis's *The Ice Harvest* and Rian Johnson's *Brick*. However, it manages to stand on its own as a fine crime film filled with interesting characters. - MW



Interplanetary (Chance Shirley, 2008, USA)

This impressive indie outing is a low budget sci-fi horror film about the employees of Mars Base 2 having a really bad day on the red planet

and is an entertaining mix of Carpenter's *The Thing* and Scott's *Alien* with some of its own unique aspects thrown in. We start with two characters finding a cave with previously excavated Martian fossils, and then finding out that they are not the only group of humans on Mars. It seems that Mars Base 1, which the workers of Mars Base 2 were told didn't actually exist, had previously found the Martian remains and were themselves conducting experiments with cloning Martians and cultivating alien eggs. Everything soon goes haywire as word leaks out about the fossils, the crew of Mars Base 2 find Mars Base 1 and its crew, and the progeny of the aforementioned alien eggs meet everyone.

Interplanetary comes highly recommended as a striking work of independent cinema with great attention to detail. Credit must be given to the costuming and props as the spacesuits and Mars rover alone must have cost a bundle, and to top it all off we are treated to some terrific creature designs. Over all *Interplanetary* is a well written and well-acted film which I hope is a sign of good things to come from director Chance Shirley and company. Also special notice should go to the fact that *Interplanetary* was shot on 16mm film and not digital video as many of its contemporaries. - JG

Perfume: The Story of a Murderer (Tom Tykwer, 2006, Germany)

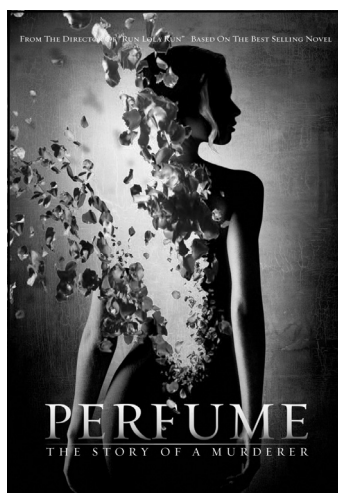
“Like most babies smell like butter, this one smelled like no other,” sang Kurt Cobain in “Scentless Apprentice,” a song based on the Patrick Süskind novel *Das Perfume*. The reclusive author held that only perhaps Milos Forman or Stanley Kubrick could do his novel justice on screen. Indeed, several directors were attached to the project (Kubrick deemed it “unfilmable” according to a 2006 article in *The Independent*) including the director who seems to have had his name bandied about for every project of the last thirty-odd years, Ridley Scott. It was *Run Lola Run* wunderkind Tom Tykwer who finally helmed the project with a screenplay by Tykwer, Bernd Eichinger (*Downfall*) and Andrew Birkin (*The Name of the Rose*).

Perfume tells the tale of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, a man born without an odor and with the most remarkable sense of smell in the world. Grenouille is a misanthropic monster whose greedy nose goes after every scent it can capture. When he learns of the odiferous essences some humans produce he turns to perfumery to learn how to extract scents, beginning a magical realist quest that places him as an eighteenth century serial killer.

The soul of beings is their scent. Ben Whishaw plays Grenouille as a soulless creature, barely uttering a word throughout the film but allowing the insatiable appetite for scents and hatred of the world around him to come through via his face and stooped body. Despite his expressive performance and John Hurt’s omniscient narration, there are nuances to *Perfume* that get lost in translation from page to screen, such as the power of Grenouille’s scents which allow him to fit in with the world, to walk amongst the people unnoticed, or to be treated as a god.

The film’s lavish look works hand in glove with its epic tone. Tykwer translates Grenouille’s ephemeral ability to the screen with flashes of images and a roaming camera that follows the flow of the wind. It turns out that Tykwer is the natural choice to direct *Perfume*; Süskind breaks narrative whenever Grenouille takes leave of a character to show his/her fate, exactly as Tykwer did with the people passed on the street in his breakout art house hit *Run Lola, Run* (1998).

An interesting and powerful film, *Perfume* fell victim to poor marketing (a movie about a murderous perfumer?) and unwillingness of audiences to identify with an enigmatic killer. - MW



Phase IV (Saul Bass, 1974, USA)

In the years shortly after WWII the world suffered from giant bugs (*Them*), lizards (*Godzilla*), and even teenagers (*Village of the Giants*). By the 1970s, the ecology continued going wild with swarms of creatures of Biblical proportions. In 1971 Walon Green and Ed Spiegel directed *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, a groundbreaking pseudo-documentary about the delicate balance between man and insect. This would inspire schlocky goodness like Bert I. Gordon’s *Empire of the Ants* and su-

perulative science fiction such as Saul Bass's *Phase IV*.

The sole feature directing effort from graphic artist Saul Bass (creator of the credits for *Vertigo*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Goodfellas*, etc.), *Phase IV* reflects Bass's unadorned, effective style. The film begins with a montage and a rather ponderous voice over from James Lesco (Michael Murphy), a numerologist with a fast aptitude for decoding the audio signals between insects. He joins etymologist Ernest Hubbs (Nigel Davenport) in his desert lair as they investigate the strange goings on of the ant kingdom. Rather than freaking out, they're nonplussed when they find a circle of pillars the ants created. They don't even seem too shocked when they poison the ants only to find that they've adapted to the insecticide within a few hours.

Along with exterminating some ants, they manage to wipe out all but one member of a local farming family, Kendra Eldridge (Lynne Frederick). She adds the id to their ego (Lesco) and superego (Hubbs), really serving as the audience's foil. More than any human, however, it's tough not to root for the ants as they find ingenious ways to torment the humans, even turning the old magnifying glass trick against them by building a shiny new structure to beam the sun's rays against the humans' building.

Ken Middleham of *The Hellstrom Chronicle* and *Damnation Alley* shot the gorgeous, albeit creepy, insect sequences. These, combined with the pacing of the plot and the sparse use of music, makes *Phase IV* a captivating flick. Alas, the film suffers from an abrupt ending thanks to a nervous studio who removed much of the bookending montage, rendering the impact of the film much softer than it should have been. - MW



Tapeheads (Bill Fishman, 1988, USA)

Ivan (John Cusack) and Josh (Tim Robbins) have been friends since they were kids, brought

together by their love of soul band The Swanky Modes (Sam Moore and Junior Walker). They've grown up to be a couple of losers, talking about big dreams while leading little lives. When they're forced out of their minimum wage gigs, they're finally able to pursue dreams of something better. This being the late '80s – the golden age of video production – the duo form Video Aces and begin shooting commercials, funerals, pet séances, video wills, political fundraisers and, inevitably, music videos.

Tapeheads perfectly captures the time when ambitious guys with video gear were out in droves, trying to pay the rent, make a name for themselves, or possibly both. Ivan and Josh scramble for gigs and hope they get paid. They get a bit of a break when they meet Mo Fuzz (Don Cornelius of *Soul Train* fame) and make a series of music videos for him... on spec, of course. Add a corrupt, kinky politician (Clu Gulager) and Mexican singing sensations Menudo to the mix and *Tapeheads* becomes a wild ride.

Director Bill Fishman came from a background of music videos (including Suicidal Tendencies' "Institutionalized"). Meanwhile Fishman's co-writer, Peter

McCarthy, had been part of the team behind *Repo Man* and *Sid & Nancy*. Between the two they had cool points to spare, making it a little easier to stock *Tapeheads* with a bevy of cameo appearances from Ted Nugent to Jello Biafra to Bobcat Goldthwait (billed as Jack Cheese) to Michael Nesmith (who also executive produced).

The film also benefitted from Cusack and Robbins's ability to improvise. Before the camera rolled, a videotaped run-through with the stars had them in their roles and coming up with a lot that ended up in the final film. The film initially ran over three hours long! The final (93-minute) movie became a victim of the De Laurentiis Entertainment Group implosion of the late '80s. *Tapeheads* played a few film festivals, including a triumphant performance at the Toronto International Film Festival. The nascent Avenue Pictures Production to double the theatrical booking... to all of about 140 theaters with none in Boston or New York.

It took years for *Tapeheads* to make back its money, though Fishman, McCarthy, Robbins and Cusack have yet to see a dime from this cult film favorite.

Toto Les Heroes (Jaco Van Dormael, 1991, Belgium)

Thomas was switched at birth. He's positive of it. He remembers it as if it were yesterday; an infant crying out in a burning hospital, having his entire life taken from him. Rather than living the privileged existence of his neighbor Alfred, he got stuck with a lackluster family, eking out a meager existence, and cursing fate every day. The only advantage of this faux family is that he gets to live with Alice, his adorable sister. And, since they're not related, it's fine to fall in love with her, right?

When confronted with this "truth," Alfred is less than gracious about giving up his mom and dad to Thomas. Thus, Thomas begins to plan his revenge, working out his place in the world. Jaco Van Dormael perfectly captures the child logic through Thomas's narration. Babies are born because men and women lie in bed smoking cigarettes; his Downs Syndrome brother was born in a washing machine; and fathers can do magic.

Toto Les Heroes is structured as a stream-of-consciousness recollection as old Thomas thinks back to his youth and middle age. Timelines may change from one cut to the next. Characters are played by multiple actors as they move forward and back along Thomas's memory. We may see good times and bad but everything is projected through a melancholy filter of regret and longing. It's like the opium dream of Noodles (Robert De Niro) in *Once Upon a Time in America*, weaving through time with the narrator's version of events somewhat tenuous.

The film won the Golden Camera and Award of the Youth prizes at Cannes in 1991. It found a lackluster VHS release in the United States. Shamefully, rights-holder Paramount has no plans for a DVD release at the time of this writing. - MW





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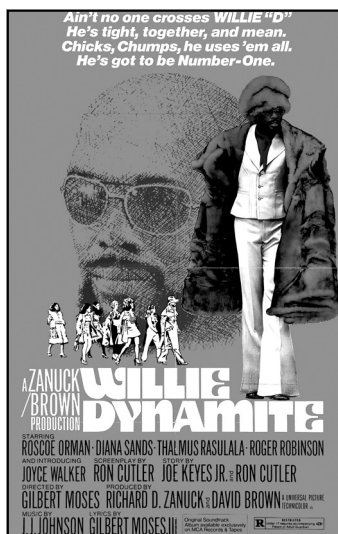
White Sands (Roger Donaldson, 1992, USA)

Taking the identity of a dead man is a common movie trope, especially in films noir, but not necessarily recommended if you enjoy an uneventful life. When po-dunk sheriff Ray Dozeal (Willem Dafoe) finds a corpse and a suitcase full of money, he adopts the name of the stiff, Bob Spenser, in order to solve the man's murder. This leads him into all sorts of trouble with arms dealer and frustrated artist Gorman Lennox (Mickey Rourke), FBI agent Greg Meeker (Samuel L. Jackson) and wealthy socialite Lane Bodine (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio). *White Sands* works as a neo-noir along with other arid works like *The Hitch-Hiker*, *Border Incident*, and *Desert Fury*. With a fairly predictable plot courtesy of screenwriter Daniel Pyne (*Where's Marlowe?*, *Matt Houston*), *White Sands* relies heavily on the performers to make it work.

Willem Dafoe shines as a sheriff who's been itching for action but not getting it either at home or on the job. He suffers from being saddled with a hat from his wife ("Did your wife get you that hat?" "Something wrong with it?" "Nothing pissing on it won't cure"). Some of Dafoe's best work comes when he's thrust into the spotlight as a semi-reluctant hero such as John LeTour in *Light Sleeper*, another 1992 role. Dafoe's quiet observer is countered brilliantly by Rourke as Lennox. The film also boasts a fair share of favorite character actors including M. Emmet Walsh, Miguel Sandoval, James Rebhorn and not-yet-to-break-out (and not shouting all of his lines), Samuel L. Jackson.

White Sands isn't a perfect film but it's a lot of fun and stands as the best of three Neo-noirs directed by Roger Donaldson. Tellingly the two other films – *No Way Out* and *The Getaway* – had been made before (and better) and based on classic hardboiled tomes instead of an original screenplay.

Dafoe and Rourke would pair up again in the profound *Animal Factory* and the dismal *Once Upon a Time in Mexico*. - MW



Willie Dynamite (Gilbert Moses, 1974, USA)

It isn't every host of your favorite childhood show that can keep his pimp hand strong and make you believe it but that's what Roscoe Orman did in *Willie Dynamite*. Yes, Gordon from *Sesame Street* walks the walk as Willie D, the baddest pimp in town.

Dressed in some of the most ridiculous outfits this side of the Players' Ball, Willie is a capitalist who bucks under the proposed socialist system of his fellow pimps. When Willie won't join the collective, they vow to take him out. If that's not bad enough, Willie's got a busybody social worker trying to talk his new ho, Pashen (Joyce Walker), out of the life.

A morality play painted in broad swaths, Willie D plays like a Jack Chick tract (one of those funky ones drawn by Fred Carter). But Chick never had the funk-ed-out score and Technicolor nightmare outfits. - MW

Future X (Kent Smith, Holloway House, 1990)

BOOK REVIEWS

BY MIKE WHITE

The year is 2073. The United States has been divided with parcels of land given to African Americans. These are institutionalized ghettos, surrounded by walls, guarded, and monitored heavily by police (called “Bruisers” for their love of inflicting pain). The story follows two men living in New Watts: Ashford and Zeke. Ashford is a radical actor who presents street plays based on outlawed books such as The Autobiography of Malcolm X (his great, great grandfather). Zeke works for The Man by day (for which he gets a pass outside of the city) while running a cell of Black Radicals by night.

It’s only a matter of time until the two men’s paths cross. As it is, the whole book becomes “a matter of time.” From the opening scene which sets up a device used by law enforcement to reverse time after a crime has occurred (where the criminal would be arrested for something they intend to do), author Kent Smith introduces a science fiction element which sounds like it might rival the “pre-crime” scenario of Philip K. Dick’s “Minority Report.” When Ashford and Zeke team up, they decide to hijack the time travel device and use it for resetting history, going back to 1964 and encouraging Malcolm X to initiate a Black Revolution.

When Ashford finally sees his ancestor, it’s the moment when Malcolm X is stabbed in an airport bathroom. Scared out of his wits, Ashford pulls off the greatest performance of his life, taking over the life of X. Black Power meets the Space Time Continuum in this insightful yarn which draws upon Charles Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities. Future X also strongly recalls Michael Moorcock’s sci-fi classic, Behold the Man, in which a time traveler assumes the life of Jesus of Nazareth, bowing to a fate which seems predestined.

Holloway was a notoriously cheap publisher. It’s obvious that they didn’t spend much (if anything) on proofreading Smith’s work. It’s dotted with typos, occasional homonym abuse, and misspelling (“looser” rather than “loser”). These are fairly easy to overlook due to the compelling story.

Satanic Screen (Nicholas Schreck, Creation Cinema Collection, 2001)

Why do I have to be this way? Why do I have to be such a nitpicker? Why do I take one small bit and make it representative of the whole? That’s the case when I read Nikolas Schreck’s The Satanic Screen.

Satan’s appearances on the silver screen have long fascinated me. I grew up during Satan’s heyday – the ’70s. He was racing with Warren Oates and Peter Fonda. He was aiding cheerleading squads. He was popping out progeny like mad. And, he was making lots of girls do lots of naughty things.

Schreck expounds on Satan’s many guises since the inception of cinema, starting with his portrayals by George Méliès and concluding with his role in *The Ninth Gate*. Along the way, Schreck breaks down Satan’s career by decade with special attention paid to his heyday in the ’60s and ’70s. Schreck’s writing is informative and wonderfully scathing when skewering lower grade demonic fare.

So what’s my problem with Schreck’s book? It’s not the omission of *Psycho-mania*, one of my favorite pact with the Devil films. No, it’s his coverage of Boris Sagal’s *The Omega Man*. I can understand reading the vampiric night denizens as a comment on the Manson Family but Schreck errs when he talks about a nuclear

war and the protagonist's crucifixion. Yes, Neville (Charlton Heston) ends up in a "Jesus Christ Pose" but it's in a fountain, not on a cross.

Why am I being so picky? Mostly because I'm not familiar with 99% of the movies Schreck discusses. Thus, if he screws up the details of the *one* film I *know* then how can I be certain the rest of his coverage is flawless? I can only hope he didn't and believe what I've read is as accurate as it is entertaining. I can definitely make exceptions for older films or movies not available on video – there are concessions to be made for memory. But, *The Omega Man*?

Regardless of my nitpicking, I recommend this read.



Ain't It Cool? (Harry Knowles, Grand Central Publishing, 2003)

I often hear, "I didn't know you were a writer!" I quickly correct anyone who thinks this about me. I'm not a writer. I'm more of a typist. I put words down on paper and hope they form sentences.

I'm not a writer, and neither is Harry Jay Knowles of the website *Ain'tItCoolNews.com*. I've never been a big fan of Harry's website due to his laborious "scene setting" efforts that attain John Grisham levels of annoying details. Says Harry, "Every review I've ever posted has probably at least paid lip service to the circumstances in which I saw the film: going there, who you're with, what it reminds you of, how it reconnects you with the continuum of your life. I just think that's endlessly relevant." You may, Harry, but I don't.

Despite this irksome style, I thought I'd give Harry's book, *Ain't It Cool?* a chance out of "car crash curiosity" – it's one of the few books I've ever seen attain a solid F in *Entertainment Weekly*.

Clocking in at 318 pages, *Ain't It Cool?* is an excruciating exercise in self-love. The introduction alone us a harrowing journey into Harry's tenuous metaphors and inappropriate peppering of movie quotes. In this case it's an overabundance of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* lines. A few hundred pages later, Knowles gives other aspiring scribes advice in aping the Knowles style including these sagacious pointers: "If you're excavating the latest gleaming factoids from a desert of archeology, see yourself as Indiana Jones digging up the Well of the Souls, searching for the Lost Ark of the Covenant. Or a three-quarter-ton dolly happens to be down on top of you? Make it the giant boulder from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This isn't rocket science. It's free association and anyone can do it with a little practice. But it looks great when all of a sudden you do it in an interview." Obviously, Harry practices what he preaches. It's just a shame that he preaches such tripe. I'd like to aim a bazooka at this book and blow it up.

Ain't It Cool? serves as another medium for Harry to use as a pulpit. Yet, it's also his confessional. It seems that Harry wants to come clean. He shares his twisted family history (TMI!) and his less-than-honest journalistic tactics. Harry describes how, after being carted to a Sundance screening of *Gods & Monsters*, he

“filed equally glowing reviews under seventeen different names, which I think went a long way toward convincing distributors that the film appealed to a broad cross-section of people.” Harry doesn’t claim that he was directly responsible but heavily implies that it was his influence that won the film a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar. In another section, it’s inferred that Harry’s championing of James Cameron’s *Titanic* (a film he just won’t shut up about) swept the Academy Awards as well. You can picture Harry’s wet dream of James Cameron saying, “I owe you a debt of gratitude, Mr. Knowles.”

There are a few “no duh” nuggets of insight in Harry’s book (“traditional entertainment stories come from press releases,” over-testing of films creates lowest common denominator entertainment) but the majority of *Ain’t It Cool?* makes one’s eyes bleed even when skimming through pages of self-congratulatory chiding of Hollywood and awestruck star-fucking. That it took Harry and not one but two (!) ghost writers to squeeze out this turd truly boggles the mind. If anything, at least co-authors Paul Cullum and Mark Ebner excised some of the excited punctuation from the “Impresario of Exclamation Points.”

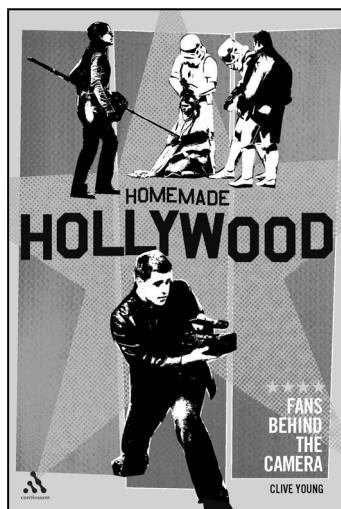
Harry is a figure of fascination for me. He’s a living caricature; *The Simpsons*’s Comic Book Guy come to life. On an episode of *The Howard Stern Show*, Stern grilled film critic Roger Ebert about Harry’s appearance on Ebert’s television show. The question of Harry’s body odor came up and Roger denied Harry emitted any foulness. Curious about Harry’s alleged aroma I consulted a friend who had put up (and put up with) Harry at a film festival.

“Does he stink?” I asked her.

With a roll of her eyes and an exasperated sigh she asked me, “Do you remember that episode of *Seinfeld* with the smelly car? That was *my* car after Harry had been in it. No one would even be in the same vehicle with him.”

More than Harry’s stench, I’m also interested in his double standards. After a bootleg copy of *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* made its way around the internet one of Harry’s disciples called for the resignation of a journalist who saw fit to review the rough cut. Harry made his bones this way and now AICN sang a different tune. Maybe, now that Harry and his cadre of zealous fanboys could score glowing

quotes on every genre film released (at least for a while), he sought to distance himself from his own practices. Regardless, it smacked of hypocrisy. Maybe Harry can address that one in the sequel.



Homemade Hollywood: Fans Behind the Camera (Clive Young, Continuum, 2008)

Former Mos Eisley Multiplex maven Clive Young has taken his love of fan films to a whole new level with his book *Homemade Hollywood: Fans Behind the Camera*. This diligently researched tome goes far beyond a fish in a barrel essay about the latest handful of dull fan films at TheForce.net and dives deep into the history of independent productions based on established works from an unsanctioned *Little Rascals*/Our

Gang shorts (which may have been part of a gift, and perfect fodder for a heart-warming film) to Ernie Fosselius's *Hardware Wars* to Kevin Rubio's *Troops* to today's freshest crop of films which may or may not get a thumbs up from the rights holders.

The tales of these films are captivating and Young relates them via perfectly structured chapters. I thought I knew the stories behind some of the more recent films discussed in *Homemade Hollywood* but Young provides a wealth of new information that put everything in proper context. Great stuff.

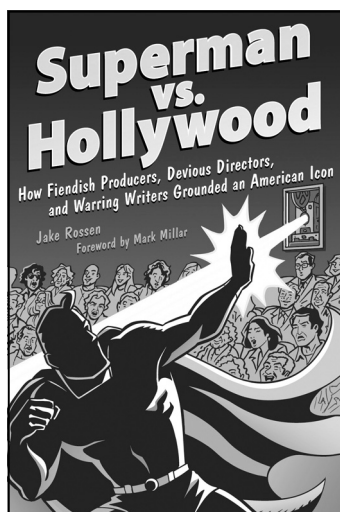
Hollywood Hex: An Illustrated History of Cursed Movies (Mikita Brottman, Creation Cinema Collection, 1999)

Hollywood Hex has some moments of interesting film study contained in its morbid pages. The book initially comes off as a dime store version of Kenneth Anger's Hollywood Babylon, recounting the sordid details of suicides, murders, and bizarre accidental deaths. After it wallows in this mire we get to the heart of the book which examines several allegedly "cursed" productions (*The Crow*, *The Exorcist*, *Poltergeist*) and a few that tie in well with famous murders (*Macbeth*, *The Believers*). Apart from the deaths/murders of several key actors from the trilogy, the examination of the initial *Poltergeist* film as an indictment of lax parenting is terrific. Likewise, Polanski's *Macbeth* as a reaction to his wife and child's murder may have been covered before in other publications but the workmanlike examination of the gory film in Hollywood Hex stands above other similar essays. Unfortunately, there are a few jarring mistakes in the book that may make the reader call the credibility of the rest of the work into question such as the timeline for *The Crow* that has the film being made a decade prior to its release. Apart from the macabre beginning and end of the book, Hollywood Hex offers some interesting analysis and solid writing.

Superman vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon (Jake Rossen, Chicago Review Press, 2008)

It was folly to think that I was the only person writing about the long, hard road from concept to screen for *Superman V* as I did in *Cashiers du Cinemart* #15 with my piece, "Superman: Grounded." The subject had been fodder for blogs and message boards for years prior. I suppose I was hoping to legitimize the subject as well as provide my obsessive-compulsive hand to the mix by hunting down every version of the proposed Superman scripts I could find. I didn't want to rely on second and third hand accounts of scrapped scripts from such unreliable sources as Ain't It Cool News.

Synchronicity has provided another take on the sordid history of Superman adaptations, Jake's Rossen's Superman Vs. Hollywood. In this tome, Rossen gives equal weight to the multi-million dollar fiasco that brought Superman to the screen in 2007 that left actors, directors, and screenwriters in its wake. He also chronicles Superman's earlier incarnations across myriad



multimedia (radio, serialized shorts, television shows, animation, etc).

Having been immersed in “all things Superman” for a while as I researched “Superman Grounded” as well as “Superman II: The Long Strange Trip,” I wasn’t expecting a lot of surprises from Rossen’s book. Luckily, he managed to pull out the aces with chapters on the *Superboy* television show and other incarnations of Kal-El that I’d never witnessed. I was tickled, too, by the author’s swipes at the “militant geeks” at AICN, even discussing the payola perks that its portly poobah proffers in exchange for positive plugs.

For anyone even remotely interested in the fantastic story of Superman’s use and abuse by the men who have owned his copyright over the years, Rossen’s book is a must-read. And, though he and I tread a lot of the same ground, his book didn’t render what I had to say about the Man of Steel completely moot.

Spooky Encounters: A Gwailo’s Guide to Hong Kong Horror (Daniel O’Brien, Critical Vision, 2003)

Somehow Daniel O’Brien’s book Spooky Encounters came out without me noticing. O’Brien gives the most comprehensive history of Hong Kong horror films during the Golden Age of HK filmmaking (roughly the ’70s through 1997) I’ve had the pleasure of reading since the second issue of Colin Geddes’s groundbreaking zine *Asian Eye*.

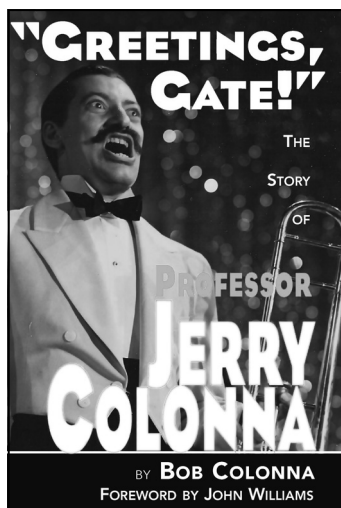
At 180 pages, Spooky Encounters is jam-packed with information, reviews, and comparisons of HK Horror. O’Brien breaks topics down into the history of HK Horror, the *Mr. Vampire* series, the influential films of Tsui Hark, Category III blends of sex and scares, and the last days of HK Horror films on the eve of the ’97 takeover. O’Brien ties the popularity of films back to their native HK box office gross which provides an interesting insight on how these films were received at the time compared to their legacy (or lack thereof).

O’Brien’s prose makes the book easy to read. Moreover, his writing is clear and concise which helps to make sense of some of the more obtuse film plots and the use of Eastern legends in others. O’Brien doesn’t take the easy road of gushing over the good films and demonizing the poor ones. His tone is even-handed though he doesn’t shy away from taking some laugh out loud potshots when necessary. One of my favorite lines comes from his review of *July the 13th/Qi Yue Shi San Zhi Long Po* he writes, “While Alan and Laura appear to be back together, the enigmatic ending hints that their happiness will be short-lived. It also suggests that Wellson Chin and Abe Kwon didn’t know how to end their film.”

Highly informative and well-crafted, Spooky Encounters is a must-read for genre fans and cineastes interested in an under-appreciated movement of cinema.

“Greetings, Gate!” The Story of Professor Jerry Colonna (Bob Colonna, BearManor Media, 2010)

Before he became an insufferable curmudgeon, Daffy Duck lived up to his name. I used to love when Daffy would bounce off of the walls and cause havoc like he did in *Daffy Doodles* where he serially defaced posters and billboards with painted-on mustaches. As a youth, the end to this cartoon befuddled me. Daffy is acquitted of his crime by a jury of twelve mustachioed men (the same man, twelve times, really) with bug eyes who all chime, “Ah, yes, not guilty!” That I didn’t know this strange man’s identity made it even more of a surreal moment. Years later, I ran across the



record album *Music for Screaming* with this same man on the cover. That day I learned Jerry Colonna's name.

For over three decades, Gerardo Luigi Colonna entertained in song, film, radio, and television. Best known as Bob Hope's sidekick, Colonna spiced up Hope's USO tours, movies, and popular radio show with his bizarre bits and signature musical style. Colonna, a trombonist by trade, would begin vocal performances with incredibly sustained opening notes (the wind up) before finally jumping into the verse head first.

Bob Colonna may not be the most objective narrator of his father's life. If anything, Bob glosses over quite a bit and doesn't brag about his father's impact as much as he could. Instead, it's a fascinating, albeit brief, discussion of the life and career of a complicated man and what could have been a simple life as a second banana. The coverage of Hope's break with Colonna gets short shrift and it often sounds like Bob didn't see all of his father's films when researching the book. However, Bob sketches his father as a loving husband and family man with a terrific sense of humor.

Greetings, Gate! may not be the definitive Colonna biography but it's a good introduction to an often overlooked entertainer. Interesting, isn't it?

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Chris Cummins is a Philadelphia-based writer who has contributed to *Topless Robot*, *Philadelphia City Paper*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, *High Maintenance*, *Geekadelphia*, *USA Today's Pop Candy* blog, and, of course, *Cashiers du Cinemart*. When not writing about pop culture, he can usually be found obsessing over everything from MTV's *120 Minutes* to *Fast Willie Jackson* comics. For more information visit www.hibernationsickness.com and on Twitter @bionicbigfoot.

David MacGregor writes plays and screenplays and spent the heat wave of the summer of 2011 in Nebraska making a film based on his play *Vino Veritas*.

Dion Conflict is a Canadian film director/archivist/streaming channel owner. An Ottawa publication called him "The David Hasselhoff of Finland." He has a passion for boot camp, and dragging Mike and Andrea to Ponderosa. His next film project will be announced at www.dionconflict.com.

Jef Burnham is the Editor in Chief at FilmMonthly.com. He earned a B.A. in Film & Video from Columbia College Chicago and recently completed a chapter for the forthcoming Open Court book on Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy.

Mid-thirties lifelong fan of all things horror, cult, and weird, **Joshua Gravel** can often be found rummaging through old video stores and used DVD sales trying to find the next obscurity to delve into. Part time projectionist and part time writer who can be located at HaunteDraculasHouseOfDorkness.blogspot.com and www.facebook.com/JoshuaTGravel

Karen Lillis is a novelist, a freelance writer, and a literary blogger. She is currently writing a memoir about working in a bookstore called Bagging the Beats at Midnight, and you can find excerpts of it at www.UndiePress.com. She blogs at Karen the Small Press Librarian: karenslibraryblog.blogspot.com

Kyle Barrowman is the Senior Editor of FilmMonthly.com. He is studying film theory and criticism in Chicago.

With every film piece written for a print publication, **Mike Malloy** wonders whether it will be his last. And because he finds online film sites – even the biggies – to be so carelessly written (even if the reporting is okay) he has little interest in peddling his wares on the 'net (although he does constantly trumpet his single byline on Slate.com). So he has instead returned, primarily, to filmmaking itself. Should he be unable to find a living-wage career there, Malloy intends to round out his working years with ditch digging. Learn more about his feature-length cinema documentary at www.facebook.com/eurocrime.

Mike Sullivan has been writing semi-professionally for the last 13 years and will be homeless, dead or both within the next two. You might have ignored him in such publications as *Shock Cinema*, *Cashiers du Cinemart*, *Scream*, *Cinema Sewer*, *Philly Edge*, *The Weekender* and his article on unmade parody movies will probably appear in an upcoming issue of *Paracinema*. Mike would also like you to know that writing in third person only serves to heighten his intense self-loathing.

Mike White says, “You all know me; know how I earn a livin’.” Be sure to tune in to the podcast he cohosts at www.projection-booth.com. Also, look for his books Cinematic Detours and Impossibly Funky. Keep up with Mike at his website, www.impossiblefunky.com.

Ralph Elawani is Montreal-based musician, music journalist and writer who will one day be a grumpy old man trapped in a body reminiscent of an aging Dustin Hoffman. His writing has appeared in *Razorcake*, *Nightlife Magazine*, *Nomag.ca*, *Midnight Pontine*, *Y & A* and elsewhere. He has been an occasional commentator on CBC Radio Canada *Bande a Part* and has curated a fair number of events at Montreal’s micro-cinema/arthouse Blue Sunshine. He is currently writing a book on Quebecois poet, film critic and novelist Emmanuel Cocke and will eventually publish a collection of short stories entitled Tous les chiens sales vont au paradis (*All Dirty Dogs Go to Heaven*). His noise rock trio, Shortpants Romance, has managed to release two EPs and one LP and to get solid reviews in publications ranging from *The Montreal Gazette* to *Les Inrockuptibles*.

Rich Osmond’s favorite movie of 2011 so far is *Drive Angry*.

Skizz Cyzyk is a Baltimore-based writer, musician, former radio disc jockey, film festival careerist, and award-winning filmmaker. He also serves on the Board of Directors for Maryland Lawyers for the Arts, plays punk rock ukulele with The Go Pills, and plays drums for indie-pop sensations, The Jennifers, surf/garage band, Garage Sale, as well as Mink Stole & Her Wonderful Band. His latest film, *Freaks in Love*, is a feature documentary about underground band, Alice Donut. His current project, *Hit & Stay*, documents religious anti-war activists and their efforts to stop the draft during the Vietnam War. Some day he will finish his documentary about Rev. Fred Lane. Keep up with Skizz at www.skizz.net.

